



Ritwik Ghatak's Cinema as a Space for Intercultural Encounter: The Reception of the Film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) by Turkish Female Audiences

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Abstract: This article examines how 12 women in Türkiye interpreted Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) in small-group screenings followed by individual interviews. Drawing on Hall's encoding/decoding model and feminist film reception research, it analyzes the participants' responses to Neeta's self-sacrifice, family obligation, and masculinity, and shows how memories of Turkish Yeşilçam melodrama shaped those responses. Participants sympathized with Neeta while questioning the expectations placed upon her, and several contrasted the film's passive male characters with the authoritative fathers they recalled from Yeşilçam. The findings reveal both cultural recognition and critical distance within this purposive sample of women aged 40 or older; the study makes no claim to represent Turkish women or audiences generally.

Keywords: Ritwik Ghatak; *Meghe Dhaka Tara*; film reception; Turkish women viewers; melodrama; Yeşilçam cinema; intercultural encounter; South-South cinema



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Introduction

Indian cinema has a documented place in the history of Turkish film culture, particularly through the circulation and adaptation of popular melodramas. Raj Kapoor's *Awaara* (1951), released in Türkiye as *Avare*, attracted audiences in the 1950s and inspired Turkish adaptations, including *Aşkın Kudreti* (Suphi Kaner, 1959) and films using the title *Avare* (Engin, 2022, p. 258). Refiğ (2001, p. 161) also recalled Turkish filmmakers drawing on commercially successful Indian narratives and soundtracks. These connections suggest a history of cultural exchange, but they do not establish that every Turkish viewer is familiar with Indian cinema. Rather, they invite a more specific question: which elements of a Bengali film become recognizable to contemporary Turkish viewers, and which remain unfamiliar? Melodrama is a useful point of entry because family obligation, loss, illness, and unequal sacrifice have been prominent in both popular Indian filmmaking and the Yeşilçam tradition.

This article examines the ways 12 Turkish women interpreted Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ghatak, 1960), attending to the relationship between cultural recognition and difference. It asks how viewers respond to the film's gendered division of labor; whether they identify with, resist, or renegotiate the expectation of feminine self-sacrifice; and how their memories of Yeşilçam cinema shape judgments of its characters. The emphasis is on the viewers' situated interpretations rather than on determining a single meaning intended by the director. The study brings Hall's (1980) account of differentiated readings into conversation with feminist film reception research, especially Stacey (1994). It also responds to scholarship on Ghatak's representation of displacement and female subjectivity (Banerjee, 2023; Natarajan, 2018).

The choice of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* reflects its sustained depiction of economic vulnerability, tuberculosis, family obligations, and a woman who supports others at the expense of her own prospects. These elements offer points of comparison with Yeşilçam melodrama without presuming that the traditions are identical. Women aged 40 or older who were familiar with Turkish popular cinema were purposively recruited because their experiences could illuminate that comparison, not because melodrama is inherently or exclusively a feminine genre. This selection also invites reflection on the association of femininity with melodrama in Turkish film criticism (Akbulut, 2008). The analysis therefore concerns a particular group of viewers in a particular screening context. It does not make claims about the attitudes of all women in Türkiye or all spectators of Ghatak's work.

The study involved a screening of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* with Turkish subtitles followed by semi-structured interviews. Participants viewed the film in small groups of three; afterward, each was interviewed individually. The interviews explored emotional responses, identification and distance, interpretations of sacrifice and care, readings of the male characters, references to Turkish melodrama, and perceptions of the film's historical setting. This distinction between group viewing and individual interviews matters because a shared screening can shape the reactions later expressed in an interview.

An Auteur in Indian Cinema: Ritwik Ghatak

Ritwik Ghatak's cinema places the historical consequences of the 1947 Partition of Bengal at the center of family narratives. His filmmaking brings together melodrama, expressive sound, theatricality, and interruptions of narrative realism. In *Cinema and I*, Ghatak (1987) describes cinema as both a collaborative practice and a medium through which filmmakers articulate their social commitments. Rather than treating Ghatak's films solely as expressions of a singular auteur, this article considers the formal strategies through which audiences encounter his representations of displacement and gender. Banerjee (2023) complicates accounts of a unified Bengali cultural memory in Ghatak's work, while

Natarajan (2018) identifies female subjectivity and patriarchal violence as central to the melodramatic force of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*.

Some Yeşilçam melodramas organize social adversity around individual suffering and the apparent inevitability of fate, a tendency Diken Yücel (2021) discusses through the concept of “social fatalism.” This framework can help explain why participants recognized aspects of poverty, romantic disappointment, and illness in Ghatak’s film. Nonetheless, resemblance should not erase difference: *Meghe Dhaka Tara* makes familial exploitation and refugee precarity objects of critique rather than simply accepting them as destiny. For the present study, “social fatalism” is a contextual comparison, not a classification that exhausts the political or formal significance of Ghatak’s cinema.

The film’s intersecting character trajectories refuse to idealize the family as an uncomplicated refuge. Competition for limited resources, romantic betrayal, and conflicting obligations expose tensions within domestic life. Menon (2013) situates Ghatak’s treatment of nationhood and historical memory within a larger account of performance and Partition. In reception terms, the importance of these contradictions lies in how viewers explain them: as inevitable misfortune, as failures of individual character, or as the effects of social arrangements that could be challenged.

Meghe Dhaka Tara is commonly discussed as the first film in Ghatak’s Partition Trilogy, followed by *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (completed in 1962 and released in 1965). Across these films, displacement becomes visible in familial relationships, performance, landscape, and sound. Yet they should not be reduced to passive accounts of suffering. Their formal excess can create critical distance and expose the contradictions of national and domestic belonging (Dass, 2017; Natarajan, 2018).

Ghatak’s use of theatrical performance, sonic interruption, and expressive composition can distance viewers from narrative events even as melodrama invites emotional engagement. Dass (2017) examines this cinematic theatricality, which complicates any straightforward opposition between

empathy and critical reflection. The present study is concerned with how viewers negotiate that tension in their accounts of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. An interview-based approach cannot establish a universal response to the film, but it can identify different interpretive positions within this group.

The Construction of Meaning by the Audience: Reception Analysis

Reception research examines the ways audiences produce meaning in relation to their experiences, viewing circumstances, and social positions. Turner (2003, pp. 138–143) discusses the contribution of British cultural studies to understanding media audiences as active interpreters rather than passive recipients. For this article, the important implication is that similarities between cinematic traditions do not automatically produce identical readings; recognition and distance can coexist.

Approaches to reception differ in their methods and intellectual histories. Reader-response theory emphasizes the reader's contribution to meaning, cultural studies investigates the negotiation of encoded meanings within social contexts, and ethnographic studies attend to what viewers say and do in specific settings (Karabağ Sarı, 2013; Mayne, 1993; Pasquier, 1997). These approaches overlap without being interchangeable. The present study is closest to the last two traditions, although it relies primarily on interviews rather than long-term participant observation.

Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model distinguishes dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional positions in relation to a media text's preferred meaning. These are analytic positions, not fixed psychological types or categories into which every individual response must fit. A viewer may recognize a film's valorization of sacrifice while criticizing its costs, for example, or may dispute whether sacrifice is being valorized at all. In the findings below, Hall's model is used cautiously to describe patterns in the interview material rather than to claim direct access to the director's intention.

Communication studies that focus specifically on audiences fall into three main categories: impact studies, studies of the cultural functions of the media, and active audience studies (Yücel, 2020, p. 75). The content of these studies is shaped by the nature of media products. Because this study focuses on

cinema, the development of reception studies in cinema warrants specific discussion. Reception studies in the field of cinema date back to the 1980s. Mayne (1993, p. 1) defines going to the movies as a cultural activity in which the symbols and myths within films are consumed. On this definition, going to the movies is more than a leisure activity. The audience is also required to interpret the symbols and myths established by the film producers.

Mayne (1993) reviews competing models of spectatorship and considers the importance of empirical, historical, and feminist approaches to actual viewing practices. That discussion is relevant here because female spectatorship cannot be inferred solely from representations of women on screen. Accounts of viewing must be grounded in the contexts and words of viewers themselves.

Stacey's *Star Gazing* (1994) offers an important precedent for attending to women's memories, identifications, and distinctions as film spectators. Her work shows that viewers' responses to cinema are shaped by their histories rather than determined by textual representations alone. The present study draws on that methodological insight while examining a different object: contemporary responses by Turkish women to a Bengali film from 1960. The interviews do not reproduce Stacey's research design or scope, but her approach helps position the viewers as interpreters of cinematic meaning.

Srinivas's (1998, 2002) research on popular Indian film audiences further demonstrates how spectators actively participate in the production of meaning. Her studies use observation and interviews to examine cinema-going as a social practice. Because this article records individual interviews following small-group screenings, it can offer evidence about viewers' articulated interpretations, but not a comprehensive ethnography of their broader cinema-going practices. That methodological distinction is maintained throughout the analysis.

Method

The study uses qualitative, interview-based reception analysis to explore the ways a purposive sample of Turkish women interpreted *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. Its concern is the meanings the participants

articulated after the screening, particularly in relation to gender, family obligation, cinematic familiarity, and cultural difference. “Ethnographic reception” refers here to the study’s attention to situated experiences and accounts of viewing; the design does not include extended field immersion or observation of participants’ everyday media practices.

Semi-structured interviews can illuminate the meanings participants attach to cultural experiences and the terms through which they explain them (Hockey & Forsey, 2012; Sevgi, 2024). In film reception research, interviews make it possible to compare the interpretations of viewers who have encountered the same film but draw on different biographical and cinematic resources. They are not direct measurements of a film’s psychological effect, and researchers must distinguish the statements of participants from their own theoretical inferences.

The methodological emphasis is therefore on interpretive depth and transparency rather than statistical representativeness. The analysis draws on the authors’ transcripts and organizes the material by themes established during the study. The interview excerpts included below allow readers to assess how individual claims emerge from specific statements; however, the sample size and recruitment strategy limit wider inference (Güllüpinar & Özkan, 2021; Şentürk Kara, 2021).

Research Group and Data Collection Process

Twelve women aged 40 or older participated between January and March 2026. They were purposively recruited on the basis of familiarity with Yeşilçam cinema and varied in occupation and educational background. Six had completed high school, and six had an associate degree or higher. Reported occupations included lecturer, accountant, teacher, sales representative, secretary, and homemaker. The selection aimed for diversity within a small qualitative sample, not demographic representativeness. Although the authors sought to obtain sufficiently varied responses for thematic analysis, the study does not document a formal saturation assessment; no claim of demonstrated data saturation is therefore made.

Participants' interpretations may reflect differences in educational experience, occupation, age, family history, and familiarity with Indian and Turkish cinema. The study did not attempt to isolate the independent effects of these variables. Its findings describe interpretive tendencies and disagreements within this group, and cannot be generalized to women in Türkiye as a whole.

The film was screened in its original language with Turkish subtitles in the researchers' homes, with participants viewing in groups of three. Individual interviews followed the shared screenings. This arrangement offered a relatively informal setting, but group viewing may have shaped later responses, and translated subtitles may have mediated dialogue and cultural references. Both factors limit any claim that the interviews capture wholly independent or unmediated interpretations of the film.

Researcher positionality is also relevant to interpreting these interviews. The researchers' social and cultural experiences may have affected their questions, interactions, and coding decisions. Their use of interview excerpts helps make some interpretations inspectable, although the study does not report independent coding, intercoder agreement, or a participant-validation procedure. These procedures should not be implied where they were not documented.

Data Collection Techniques

Immediately after the screenings, participants took part in individual semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45–50 minutes. Audio recordings were made with their consent. The interview guide addressed four areas: emotional response and initial impressions; identification with characters; comparisons with Turkish cinema and cultural experiences; and perceptions of the film's historical and political setting.

The recordings were transcribed and analyzed descriptively using themes related to the research questions. Participants are identified as P1–P12 to protect their identities. The quoted responses are presented as English renderings of the interviews; the original-language transcripts are not reproduced

here. In the absence of a documented translation-validation procedure, the analysis relies on the English versions supplied by the researchers.

Findings

The findings below concern how participants interpreted *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), whose central character, Neeta, supports her refugee family after the Partition of Bengal. The discussion distinguishes descriptions of the interview responses from the authors' interpretations of those responses. Differences among participants are as significant as points of agreement.

The analysis draws on individual interviews after the group screenings, supplemented by the researchers' reported observations of participant reactions. It focuses on the themes most evident in the available statements: sacrifice, female agency, maternal authority, male roles, and the remembered conventions of Yeşilçam melodrama.

Participants' Background and Prior Knowledge

Some participants who reported prior exposure to Indian cinema described the film as familiar, while others approached it with greater distance. The interviews also suggested different ways of explaining the film's events: a number of participants referenced their own lives or Yeşilçam narratives, whereas others focused on the characters' social circumstances. These responses should not be interpreted as proof that education produces a more analytical response; the small sample, uneven backgrounds, and absence of a systematic comparison do not support that causal conclusion.

Perception and Emotional Response

Several participants described sacrifice and the unequal distribution of family responsibilities as central to the film. They expressed both sadness at Neeta's situation and anger at the demands placed upon her. For P7 (44, teacher), the film resonated with experiences remembered within Turkish families:

“Because we’ve witnessed similar stories or perhaps seen such things from our elders, this is actually an issue that will affect us at every stage of our lives.”

P7’s statement connects the film to familial experience. P1 (53, lecturer), however, emphasized the costs of self-sacrifice rather than embracing Neeta’s behavior as exemplary:

“Generally speaking, I felt sorry for the person who made that sacrifice . . . It showed me how meaningless it is to give up on oneself and live only for others.”

P1’s response illustrates how compassion for Neeta can coexist with criticism of the social expectation that she should subordinate her life to others.

The Realism of the Narrative and Interpretation of the Message

Viewers found the narrative quite realistic and noted that the topic has a counterpart in daily life. According to viewers, the narrative presents the dominant gender roles of everyday life. P3 (46, lecturer) emphasized this situation by saying, “Actually, this happens everywhere in the world; I don’t think it’s specific to Türkiye—women experience this.” P2 (40, lecturer), meanwhile, expressed the similarity by saying, “In our society too, older sisters, older brothers, or parents are ready to sacrifice themselves for their families by working. That’s why it resembles us.” In particular, P5 (48, accountant) noted that the film’s plot resembled Yeşilçam films and might have been adapted from a Turkish TV series in the past, highlighting the influence of local cinematic memory on reception.

Several participants interpreted the film as questioning excessive self-sacrifice. P1 (53, lecturer) remarked, “To be honest, the film told me that everyone should think of themselves first.” Such responses can be approached through Hall’s (1980) idea of a negotiated reading: viewers recognize the moral force of caring for family while questioning the demand that one person carry the cost. This is a reading of the participants’ explanations, not proof that the film encodes a single preferred judgment about sacrifice.

The Role of Womanhood and Perceptions of Self-Sacrifice Through the Character of Neeta

Participants noted that Neeta's education and intelligence do not protect her from economic and familial pressures. Some framed her endurance as an effect of learned expectations of women's self-sacrifice, while others criticized it as a form of submission. P8 (55, teacher) explained this response in the following terms:

“She's actually a smart girl, she's in college, academically intelligent, but emotionally she gives up so much of herself. She was raised with that victim mentality, or it was already within her.”

P7 (44, teacher), on the other hand, interpreted Neeta's passivity as a sense of helplessness: “I think she's submitted to everything because she knows she can't change anything. She's saying, ‘I have to bear this burden.’ That's helplessness, in my opinion.”

Several participants described Neeta's silence as a source of frustration. P9 (40, homemaker) characterized her as a “victim who takes on the role of savior,” and P8 (55, teacher) commented that “Neeta's silence has drained us.” Such statements show that at least some viewers understood her illness and quietness in relation to familial pressure, rather than solely as elements of a tragic plot.

The responses resist a single division between identification and rejection. Some viewers challenged what they saw as Neeta's passivity, while also recognizing the unequal conditions that constrained her options. Their accounts make room for sympathy, impatience, and criticism at once. It would be misleading to present these reactions as a uniform refusal of passive femininity by “the Turkish viewer.”

Bourdieu (2001) examines how gender domination may become naturalized through bodily habits and social expectations. Neeta's reserved manner and posture can be read in this light, but that theoretical interpretation must not be mistaken for an explicit claim made by the interviewees. P1 (53, lecturer) described her response to Neeta's predicament as follows:

“It’s pure humiliation—there’s no other name for it . . . What does it mean that your sister is going to take your husband away? It happened—step aside. She just stood there, crying silently to herself”.

Some participants thus criticized Neeta’s apparent lack of resistance without dismissing the pressures that shaped it. Their responses suggest a tension between judging a character’s choices and recognizing structural limitations on those choices. The evidence does not establish how Turkish audiences generally understand women’s agency.

Participants also noticed how Neeta’s physical exhaustion and demeanor convey the burden she bears. P2 (40, lecturer) offered an especially vivid formulation:

“She was in such a difficult situation that it seemed as if the weight of the entire world had fallen on her shoulders.”

Several interviewees connected Neeta’s sacrifice to experiences across generations. P9 (40, homemaker), for instance, said that self-sacrificing women had existed “in every era.” P2 expressed a related sense of inherited obligation:

“Yes, we see this in our mothers and our elders. That’s why we feel we have to do the same.”

P3 (46, lecturer), by contrast, questioned both the character and aspects of the director’s representation:

“Throughout the time I watched it, I was always a bit annoyed, disappointed, and sad toward her. For example, her mother . . . the responsibility of the entire family rested on her daughter’s shoulders. The director hadn’t approached this issue fairly.”

P3’s response challenges the assumption that identifying with a suffering protagonist requires accepting her behavior as justified. Such criticism is analytically useful, but the interview evidence does not support broad claims about generational differences; the participants span a relatively limited age range and were not recruited to compare generations systematically.

Other participants linked their responses to their own life experiences. P2 (40, lecturer) said that she might act much as Neeta did, whereas P1 (53, lecturer) recalled times when she too had made sacrifices:

“Perhaps that’s why the film affected me so deeply. I saw traces of myself in it. Not as blindly as she did, but there have been times in my life when I, too, made great sacrifices.”

Together these comments show the coexistence of critical distance and emotional identification. A viewer may object to Neeta’s silence while recognizing the pressure to prioritize family members’ needs. The interviews suggest variation within the group, but cannot establish a reliable generational pattern or a uniform attitude among Turkish women.

The interviews also caution against treating Hall’s (1980) reading positions as simple labels. Sympathy with a character is not necessarily a dominant-hegemonic reading of the film, and criticism of that character is not automatically oppositional. The more defensible finding is that participants moved between recognizing the conventions of sacrificial melodrama and challenging the family relations those conventions portray.

Participant P6 (40, sales representative) positioned Neeta not as a victim but as an active subject who “assumes the male role” within a patriarchal order:

“Considering that era in a male-dominated society . . . those are roles that men should typically take on. But Nita, as a woman, is taking on the male role. That means she’s a very strong character.”

P6’s account frames Neeta’s economic responsibility as evidence of strength while retaining the conventional assumption that earning and providing are normally masculine roles. This mixture of admiration and gender-role expectations exemplifies the negotiations the study seeks to describe.

On the other hand, participants noted that the tragedy Neeta experiences intensely evokes feelings of anger and sorrow. Ghatak (2000) understood film as a medium capable of stirring emotion and

sharpening public reflection. In the interviews, viewers expressed these feelings with the following words:

P10 (55, homemaker): “I felt very sorry for Nita.”

P2 (40, lecturer): “Yes, actually, from time to time . . . I’ve said, ‘Come on, say something, do something. You need to take the initiative too.’ There have been times when I’ve gotten frustrated and told her to say just a few words.”

P2’s frustration shows how the same character can evoke compassion and demands for greater agency. It should not be interpreted as demonstrating a common “modern” attitude among Turkish women, given the study’s limited sample.

Across the interviews, terms such as “heartbreaking,” “familiar,” and “injustice” appeared alongside critical judgments about Neeta’s choices. Identification was often qualified rather than complete, as the contrasting statements below indicate:

P1 (53, lecturer): “I identified most with Nita. But I said I’m only about 25–30% like Nita, yet I still felt I resembled her the most.”

P9 (40, homemaker): “I didn’t find any of them relatable. None of their reactions seem normal to me. I can’t say I’d do any of those things.”

These responses illustrate different distances from the film. P1 identifies with aspects of Neeta’s life while resisting full equivalence; P9 rejects identification with any of the characters. The coexistence of such readings is more informative than a general claim that Turkish viewers either accept or reject melodramatic passivity.

Maternal Authority and Economic Pressure

Participants frequently situated Neeta’s mother within poverty and the pressures of maintaining the household. Kandiyoti’s (1988) discussion of patriarchal bargaining is helpful here because women

may exercise authority within familial hierarchies without controlling the broader social arrangements that constrain them. P10 (55, homemaker) and P7 (44, teacher) interpreted the mother's behavior with some sympathy:

P10 (55, homemaker): "The mother of the house has a heavy workload but is a woman who speaks her mind. Life has unfortunately crushed them. She's not really a bad woman at heart, but she's exhausted and worn out."

P7 (44, teacher): "The mother . . . She's not passive compared to the father, but she does what she can . . ."

In these accounts, the mother's pressure on Neeta is neither excused nor explained solely as malice. Instead, the participants related her authority and frustration to poverty, constrained choices, and family survival. Their comments show why motherhood in this film cannot be reduced to either selfless care or simple domination.

P3 (46, lecturer) noted that the mother character in the film differs from those in Yeşilçam melodramas and that mothers in Yeşilçam were much more self-sacrificing:

"In our Yeşilçam, a mother might be more self-sacrificing. . . . Here, the woman remains more passive; she looks at the money she receives, then starts yelling and screaming."

P3's comparison is revealing because it treats remembered Yeşilçam representations as a standard against which Ghatak's mother is judged. The participant's recollection does not establish that all Yeşilçam mothers were more self-sacrificing; it identifies a familiar cinematic expectation informing this particular reading.

Here, an ideal of maternal care associated with Yeşilçam comes into tension with Ghatak's harsher portrait of domestic scarcity. Kandiyoti's (1988) account of patriarchal bargaining helps explain why the mother's pursuit of resources can be perceived as a failure of affection even when economic vulnerability limits her options.

The Role of Womanhood Through the Character of Geeta

Viewers characterized Geeta as a selfish and irresponsible woman. This situation can be interpreted within the context of Hall's (1980) concept of the "dominant reading"; while the director positions Geeta in contrast to the self-sacrificing character of Neeta, viewers have internalized this contrast and found the character problematic for failing to assume patriarchal responsibilities. However, the participants' statements indicate that a negotiated reading also occurs at times within this interpretation:

P10 (55, homemaker): "It's painful to build one's own happiness on someone else's unhappiness. Of course, a person should strive for their own happiness. But to do so at the expense of her own sister's happiness . . . that's a painful situation."

P10's statement highlights the moral dilemma between "personal happiness" (a modern value) and "family obligations" (a traditional value) as perceived by the audience. Viewers do not reject Geeta's expectation of happiness, but they interpret the realization of this expectation despite Neeta's suffering through a melodramatic sense of conscience. This reveals that the viewer understands the role of womanhood not merely in terms of obedience, but within a relational ethical framework.

According to Mulvey (1975, p. 11), the woman in the traditional object-of-desire role has been shaped so that her appearance is coded for strong visual and erotic impact, connoting "to-be-looked-at-ness." While the fetishized female role Geeta assumes in the film aligns with this approach, Neeta's lover Sanat occupies the position of the active subject who directs the fantasy and represents domination. As Mulvey (1975) also notes, the male character in the film represents the side that holds power and directs the narrative.

Participants evaluated which portrayal of womanhood the film presented as "reasonable" within this framework of power relations. While Neeta's life ending tragically despite all her sacrifices was

interpreted by participants as a “punishment,” Geeta’s happy ending was viewed as a form of social approval.

The participants’ remarks, including P12’s comment on the sisters quoted below, reveal competing expectations: P12 condemns Geeta’s apparent indifference to her family, whereas P10 acknowledges her right to happiness but questions the cost to Neeta. Rather than assuming that the viewers simply internalize a prescribed moral hierarchy, the evidence suggests that some negotiate between personal autonomy and obligations to others.

Mulvey’s (1975) account of visual pleasure can illuminate the film’s construction of gendered looking, but the present interviews do not analyze shot structure in sufficient detail to establish a sustained male-gaze reading. The more securely supported finding is that participants interpreted Geeta’s choices relationally, in comparison with Neeta’s sacrifices and Sanat’s position in the narrative.

The Role of Masculinity Through Male Characters

Viewers interpreted the role of masculinity in the film by comparing it to representations from the Yeşilçam era. While men in Yeşilçam were portrayed as authoritarian figures who provided for the family, the male characters in this film were perceived by viewers as weaker and more passive:

P6 (40, sales representative): “In our culture, men are always dominant, and men are always the ones who work.”

Participants considered the sisters’ contrasting outcomes when discussing the film’s moral implications. For P8 (55, teacher), the contrast suggested an unsettling possibility that the self-sacrificing woman is punished while the more self-interested sister survives. This is the participant’s moral interpretation, not a demonstrable endorsement of that outcome by Ghatak.

P5 (48, accountant): “Dad was a good man, it’s a shame . . . He did the best he could given the circumstances of the time, but he couldn’t provide for the family. During the Yeşilçam era,

women weren't really allowed to work, and girls weren't allowed to go to school. It was a more backward time."

P5's comparison connects male authority to the ability to provide for a household. It also draws on a generalized recollection of restrictions on women's education and employment in Turkish popular cinema. Such memories are valuable evidence about the participant's interpretive frame, but they should not be taken as a comprehensive historical description of Yeşilçam.

These statements from the participants demonstrate that they view male authority not only as tied to culture but also as a structure dependent on economic power. By comparing Yeşilçam's "strong and authoritarian" man with Ghatak's "good, but passive" father, the participants demonstrate a logical awareness of the "conflictual and fragile" nature of masculine roles. This situation demonstrates that cinematic memory serves as a significant tool not only in interpreting the image of womanhood but also in analyzing the boundaries of male authority.

The interviews suggested that some participants recalled Yeşilçam fathers as relatively authoritative providers and, by comparison, perceived several men in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* as economically weak or passive. The contrast describes remembered screen conventions, not actual gender roles in either society. P4 (54, homemaker) and P10 (55, homemaker) offered briefer remarks:

P4 (54, homemaker): "Men are very passive. We see that here, yes."

P10 (55, homemaker): "He was a man of high culture and awareness, but he wasn't very active."

These comments suggest that perceived masculinity is linked, for some viewers, to employment, authority, and responsibility for dependents. Connell's (2005) theory of masculinities provides a context for this interpretation, although the interviews do not establish a transformation of hegemonic masculinity as a social structure.

P4 (54, homemaker): "It didn't seem very normal to me. The brother isn't doing anything for his dreams. . . . I think we need to find a middle ground between the two."

Participants also evaluated the father and other male characters in relation to economic dependence and vulnerability. Elsaesser's (1991) account of family melodrama is relevant to this tension between normative authority and actual powerlessness. Their remarks describe how the characters were perceived rather than offering a fixed taxonomy of men in Indian or Turkish cinema.

In the film, the younger brother is portrayed as a passive and ineffective figure who tries to provide financial support to the family, while the other brother was seen as indifferent:

P12 (55, homemaker): "The other brother doesn't care at all; the sister has gone and taken her older sister's boyfriend."

Neeta's boyfriend, Sanat, is portrayed as a negative character because he received financial support from Neeta during his period of unemployment and later married Geeta:

P11 (50, homemaker): "Sanat isn't actually that bad at heart, but he acted without character."

The fact that viewers describe Sanat and Neeta's brother as "lacking character" demonstrates that the role of masculinity is addressed not only through a culture of oppression but also through moral norms such as loyalty and responsibility. Participants describe men who fail to fulfill their responsibilities through a melodramatic discourse of injustice; this reveals that while they criticize passive femininity, they simultaneously harbor a desire for just masculinity.

The audience's approach to male characters validates the structure of melodrama, which is built upon moral representations. According to Brooks (1976/1985, p. 35), in melodrama, beyond character depth, there is a drama constructed through pure moral symbols such as "father, daughter, duty, obedience." In this context, the positioning of Sanat as "characterless" and the older brother as "selfish" reveals that the audience interprets the characters not through psychological tensions but through social values such as loyalty, self-sacrifice, and responsibility.

These statements suggest that viewers decode the images of masculinity in the film not merely through individual elements, but also through those "moral markers," as Brooks points out. The viewer

associates a character's goodness or wickedness with whether or not they assume these social/familial obligations. This situation clearly demonstrates how the universal moral codes of melodrama resonate with the participants and how they integrate with local values (responsibility, loyalty).

Family Structure and Social Conditions

In the interviews, viewers stated that poverty is the cornerstone of the film. According to the participants, conditions of poverty have led to the breakdown of family relationships and created emotional detachment:

P3 (46, lecturer): "Actually, the siblings love each other. . . . I suppose there's a lack of affection and a sense of estrangement between them due to financial hardships . . . just a family struggling to feed themselves and stay afloat."

According to Bhattacharya (1979), the poverty depicted in Ghatak's films is so realistic that it upends the era's "romantic conception of cinema." Poverty is not merely an economic problem but a social reality that shapes individuals' psychological states and family relationships. Some participants noted that the narrative reflects the historical and geographical conditions in India:

P7 (44, teacher): "Even under today's conditions, India is one of the poorest countries in the world . . . It's very real."

These statements from viewers highlight the importance of the spatial and class context. Viewers define poverty not merely as a melodramatic dilemma, but as an economic deprivation that limits the characters' emotional worlds and moral principles. The "alienation" mentioned by P3 is a form of deprivation that destroys individuals not only physically but also psychologically by undermining family relationships. This reveals that Ghatak's realistic perspective builds a cultural emotional connection with the participants' social memory of poverty. The film reveals a social reality shared by Yeşilçam and Indian cinema.

According to participants, the mother character has hardened due to the effects of poverty; the father, on the other hand, is a character trapped within himself, having accepted the economic conditions. For the participants, the only character who truly values family bonds is Neeta. P1 described this situation within the family as follows:

P1 (53, lecturer): “The mother’s emotional detachment has rubbed off on the family. Neeta is a character closer to her father . . . There is no such family bond in the others. Only Neeta possesses a sense of responsibility and emotional depth.”

The viewer’s statement indicates that poverty has transformed family relationships into a struggle for survival and has placed the burden of emotional closeness solely on Neeta. The mother’s emotional detachment is interpreted by viewers not as a flaw, but as a defense mechanism she has developed in the face of the social reality of poverty. The viewer describes Neeta’s emotional bond with her father as a traumatic connection formed between two “oppressed” and “passive” characters. This situation suggests that poverty creates not only physical suffering within the family but also a moral and emotional rupture between individuals.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons

In the interviews, Neeta’s sacrifices and poverty were found to resemble Türkiye’s historical experiences and Yeşilçam melodramas. Some viewers stated that poverty reminded them of periods Türkiye had witnessed and that the film therefore did not feel foreign:

P12 (55, homemaker): “It’s familiar, you know. . . . After all, we’ve experienced everything the same way, we’ve lived through it. And these things were certainly experienced more clearly by those before us, during the periods of poverty.”

Participants stated that while the film felt foreign to them in terms of cultural elements (clothing, indicators of daily life, sound, music, setting), they still felt an emotional connection to it:

P6 (40, sales representative): “Of course, the music and clothing are foreign. They only have what we might call ‘sheet-like’ clothing.”

The viewers’ narratives reveal that the reception process highlights the dialectical relationship between “cultural distance” and “historical proximity.” While the viewer perceives cultural representations such as clothing and decor as distant, they interpret structural elements like poverty and family breakdown within the context of their own social memory. This situation demonstrates that South–South cultural interaction (India and Türkiye) is shaped not merely by casual cultural curiosity, but through a shared social memory and class practices; in this way, it suggests that cultural distance is bridged.

It has been noted that the two cinematic traditions (Yeşilçam and Ghatak cinema) share similarities in the context of sacrifice, the theme of tuberculosis, and Neeta’s tragedy:

P8 (55, teacher): “The film *Boş Beşik*. There, too, Kartal Tibet dies of tuberculosis. . . . You know, during the Yeşilçam era, it was also used as the worst disease of the past . . . a disease that kills just like cancer does today.”

P4 (54, homemaker): “In Neeta, I saw the gestures of Filiz Akın and Hülya Koçyiğit . . . I saw them directly in some of their facial expressions and movements.”

According to viewers, while female representations in Yeşilçam were passive and limited to domestic roles, the women in the film are portrayed as educated and relatively economically empowered figures:

P5 (48, accountant): “Mothers in our films were more submissive, self-sacrificing, accepting whatever came their way. I remember Adile Naşit, for example . . . It’s a shame—she was someone who tried to make her children happy no matter what. . . . Women back then had simpler characters; they weren’t the kind who read a lot, went to college, or worked.”

The participants' statements reveal that while the two cinematic traditions share a common theme (tuberculosis and tragedy), they diverge from one another at a sociological level in terms of gender roles. While tuberculosis is coded as a melodramatic representation of class and bodily tragedy in both cinemas, the participants' ability to draw connections between Neeta's gestures and those of Filiz Akın and Hülya Koçyiğit suggests that acting codes carry a transnational affinity. However, viewers also decipher the distance between Yeşilçam's traditional, self-sacrificing, and domestically confined mother figure—represented by Adile Naşit—and Ghatak's mother, who fails to adapt to modernism and prioritizes economic concerns over maternal love. This situation demonstrates that Turkish audiences, when engaging with a foreign narrative, utilize Yeşilçam not merely for its historical dimension but as a critical framework that tests women's agency.

According to some participants, family members in Yeşilçam are portrayed as more closely bonded, and fathers as more dominant characters:

P4 (54, homemaker): "I think fathers were more despotic in Yeşilçam . . . they had more dominant personalities."

The findings indicate that even if participants do not consider the film to be culturally identical to Turkish melodramas, they still feel a historical and emotional connection in terms of dramatic structure and representations of womanhood:

P1 (53, lecturer): "That's how melodramas were in our day, too. . . . Just like in Yeşilçam—a poor girl. It really made me feel like I was watching one of those Yeşilçam melodramas."

These responses suggest that familiar Yeşilçam narrative expectations helped some viewers interpret Ghatak's film while also drawing attention to its differences. The material supports a comparison between remembered cinematic conventions; it does not establish a uniform national approach to film reception.

The “feeling of watching a Yeşilçam melodrama” noted by P1, however, reveals how the participants decipher the cross-cultural emotional imagery of the melodramatic narrative and how Yeşilçam serves as a fundamental interpretive framework in the process of receiving these films.

Katz and Liebes (1990) argue that audiences do not passively consume the text but rather use it to reflect on their cultural identities and question their lives. This study also guided participants toward a similar process of reflection. Viewers noted that the concept of self-sacrifice centered on women is also present in Turkish culture, and that Neeta’s tragedy is therefore “familiar.” Additionally, it was stated that this concept has transformed in the new generation:

P5 (48, accountant): “Culturally, we’re close. In our culture, women are generally self-sacrificing. . . . But if you think about the new generation, that kind of culture doesn’t exist anymore. . . . Both culture and our family structure have an influence.”

The viewers’ observations demonstrate that the reception process does not merely involve connecting with the past; it also entails an effort to make sense of the social changes brought about by modernization—particularly regarding gender roles—and the growing generational divide. In addressing Neeta’s tragedy, the viewer is also deciphering the structural transformations within their own local culture.

Brooks (1976/1985) defines melodrama as a “radically democratic” art form and notes that it is constructed with symbols accessible to all individuals. According to the author, moral symbols such as “father, child, innocence, justice” offer distinct dramatic codes that can be interpreted at a universal level, beyond complex depths. In this context, participants have expressed that the film possesses a universal quality:

P12 (55, homemaker): “This could happen in Europe, or here. When I watch it, it should be able to be shown all over the world.”

P12's remark about the possibility of showing the film in different countries evokes the perceived reach of melodrama beyond its immediate cultural setting. Brooks's (1976/1985) account of melodramatic expression offers one interpretive framework, but a single participant's view cannot validate a universal theory of audience response.

Ang (1985) states that audiences use media texts to evaluate their own experiences. In this context, the study demonstrates that the film is received through cultural affinities and universal melodramatic representations; the emotional impact, however, emerges from the convergence of culture, generation, and personal experience.

The film creates a sense of cultural distance in the audience by being perceived as "foreign" in terms of music, clothing, acting, and everyday life practices. However, despite this formal distance, the director has evoked a powerful emotional impact in the participants:

P11 (50, homemaker): "The costumes and music feel distant. . . . They actually experience events very differently, but in the end, the director has created an emotional response in the audience."

P4 (54, homemaker): "They don't act as emotionally as we do. Culture might influence acting."

These responses show how viewers can acknowledge a film's unfamiliar costumes, music, or performance styles while experiencing its family conflicts as intelligible. Ang (1985) helps frame this coexistence of distance and engagement without treating emotional recognition as evidence of cultural sameness.

Historical and Contemporary Reception

According to Ghosh (2025), Ghatak constructs the trauma of refugees—using visual and auditory forms—not so much as a cry of anguish but within the context of absence, lack, and melancholy. He clearly demonstrates this approach in the first film of the trilogy, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*; it addresses post-partition individual fragmentation through concepts of oppression, role conflict, and a fragmented self. Gledhill (1987), who emphasizes the role of melodramatic aesthetics in non-Western cultures, notes

that these texts must be evaluated within their specific historical contexts. In this context, the film transcends Western melodramas by serving as a reflection of the “historical trauma” experienced by Bengali society following the 1947 Partition, thereby making this trauma-driven culture visible.

Nevertheless, participants stated that they did not clearly perceive the historical effects of the 1947 Partition of Bengal. They emphasized that while they deeply felt the impact of poverty on the characters, the political and historical dynamics of the partition were not directly presented:

P11 (50, homemaker): “There were parts where it mentioned some revolutionary youth. But it felt like they were squeezed in; it didn’t take center stage.”

The film evoked a desire to compare current conditions and a sense of “gratitude” among the participants. Some participants even critically questioned the narrative, noting that the characters’ access to education contradicted the portrayal of “extreme poverty”:

P8 (55, teacher): “A person who is very poor can’t even send their child to school. These people are, after all, very poor, yet they all go to school.”

P7 (44, teacher): “It’s a very harsh life by today’s standards. We’re talking about a 65-year generational gap here.”

The available interviews suggest that several participants foregrounded family obligations, economic hardship, and gendered sacrifice more readily than the historical specifics of Partition. This does not mean they failed to recognize the film’s politics, nor does it establish the response of Turkish audiences generally. Rather, it indicates how the screening and interview prompts oriented this group toward particular issues.

Conclusion

This study examined the responses of 12 women in Türkiye to *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), focusing on how they interpreted sacrifice, femininity, masculinity, and the conventions of melodrama.

Rather than identifying a single “Turkish” interpretation, the interviews disclosed overlapping modes of recognition, empathy, criticism, and cultural distance.

The study’s principal contribution is to show how viewers familiar with Yeşilçam cinema used their remembered conventions to interpret a Bengali film they encountered in a research screening. Some recognized familiar narratives of poverty, self-sacrifice, and family obligation; others questioned Neeta’s silence, criticized her relatives, or found the film’s male characters unlike the men they remembered from Turkish melodrama. These are situated interpretations that emerge from individual accounts, not evidence that a whole audience reads non-Western films in one way.

The findings also expose tensions within individual responses. Some participants expressed sorrow for Neeta while wishing that she would resist her family’s demands; others interpreted the same sacrifice as strength. The most useful conclusion is therefore not a categorical contrast between “traditional” and “modern” women, but an account of how different expectations about care and autonomy can coexist in reception.

Formal differences remained perceptible. Participants mentioned music, costumes, performance, and unfamiliar details, yet they could still relate the film’s domestic conflicts to their own histories or to Yeşilçam stories. The combination of familiarity and difference is central to intercultural reception, and is more informative than describing melodrama as a universal emotional language.

The study also points to a possible route for future research on South–South cinematic reception: the comparison of film cultures outside a predominantly Euro-American framework. The present data do not demonstrate a broad historical circulation of Ghatak’s cinema in Türkiye or establish general audience preferences, but they show how one small group made a Bengali film meaningful through Turkish film memories.

The study is limited by its small purposive sample, the concentration on women aged 40 or older, the single selected film, group screenings before individual interviews, and the use of Turkish subtitles.

The study does not report a formal translation-validation procedure or a systematic comparison by age and education. Within these limits, the interviews offer an instructive account of how women viewers can simultaneously identify with and contest the moral expectations of melodrama. Future studies could compare more varied participant groups, investigate the reception of other Ghatak films, and document how different screening and translation contexts influence interpretation.

Editor's note: Additional scholarship

In addition to the scholarship already discussed, O'Donnell (2004) reads Neeta as a sacrificed goddess figure within Ghatak's treatment of woman and homeland, which bears directly on the participants' discussions of sacrifice and womanhood. Sarkar (2009) offers a broader account of Partition and Indian cinema. Two further essays in this issue of CINEJ also discuss *Meghe Dhaka Tara*: Arslan (2026) reads the film's sound, lighting, and framing as a counter-memory of gendered displacement, and Erdem (2026) reads it, together with Ghatak's other Partition films, through cognitive estrangement. Banerjee's (2023) CINEJ study, already cited above, is also pertinent. These sources have been included where directly relevant; the interpretive claims remain those of the authors.

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ENDNOTES:

- ¹ The authors state that the study received approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Humanities Sciences at İnönü University.