



Between Marxist Melodrama and Left Melodrama: Gendered Labor and Suspended Political Possibility in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960)

Eşref Akmeşe, Batman University, esrefakmese@gmail.com

Alper Erçetingöz, Aydın Adnan Menderes University, alper.ercetingoz@adu.edu.tr

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.1007 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

Abstract: This article examines Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) through Marxist melodrama, left melodrama, and left melancholy. Using historically contextualized, scene-based formal analysis, it argues that the film renders Partition, class decline, and gendered exploitation visible through Neeta's paid work, unpaid care labor, and bodily exhaustion. The refugee family becomes a site where material dependency is reproduced through love, duty, and sacrifice. Framing, domestic space, and disruptive sound intensify Neeta's suffering without allowing consolatory catharsis. Yet the film depicts no organized collective response. Neeta's final cry and the recurring broken sandal nevertheless preserve traces of unrealized collective desire. The film thus moves between Marxist and left melodrama, its unresolved political desires lending it a left-melancholic dimension.

Keywords: Ritwik Ghatak; *Meghe Dhaka Tara*; Marxist melodrama; left melodrama; left melancholy; gendered labor; Partition of Bengal; Bengali cinema



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.

Pitt | Open
Library
Publishing

This journal is published by [Pitt Open Library Publishing](http://pittopenlibrarypublishing.com).



Between Marxist Melodrama and Left Melodrama: Gendered Labor and Suspended Political Possibility in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960)

Eşref Akmeşe

Alper Erçetingöz

Introduction

Although melodrama is commonly associated with emotional intensity and individual suffering, it can also render historical trauma, class inequality, and ideological tension perceptible through emotional experience (Gledhill, 1987; Williams, 1998). This capacity is especially significant in family melodrama, where economic dependency, social roles, and power relations take concrete form in everyday life. Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ghatak, 1960) explores these possibilities through a refugee family displaced and stripped of its former class position after the Partition of Bengal. The household's survival depends largely on Neeta's wages and unpaid care work, yet her contributions are naturalized as familial responsibility and feminine sacrifice. Her suffering emerges from the convergence of displacement, class decline, and the exploitation of gendered labor.

The film makes these structural relations felt through narrative, sound, framing, space, and the body. Formal choices that isolate Neeta, constrict domestic space, and register bodily exhaustion invite identification without allowing her suffering to resolve in consolatory catharsis. Exploitation becomes perceptible, but recognition does not lead to a collective political subject or transformative action.

The article approaches this tension through Marxist melodrama, left melodrama, and left melancholy. Marxist melodrama brings into view the class, labor, and material relations underlying individual suffering. Anker's (2012) left melodrama accounts for the limits of a critique that renders injustice emotionally and morally legible without producing a transformative political horizon. The contested concept of left melancholy helps explain how attachments to loss and defeat can either

immobilize political critique or preserve desires for emancipation that have not found a collective form (Benjamin, 1931/2005; Brown, 1999; Traverso, 2016).

The study asks how *Meghe Dhaka Tara* makes Partition trauma, class exploitation, and gendered labor perceptible through melodramatic form, and where this visibility reaches its limits in relation to political transformation. It argues that the film turns Neeta's suffering into a felt expression of historical displacement, labor exploitation within the family, and class disintegration, yet does not carry these contradictions into collective action. Political possibility is not entirely foreclosed: it persists in Neeta's demand to live and in the recurring broken sandal as an insistent demand for life that has not acquired an organized political form. Combining historical contextualization, genre analysis, and scene-based formal analysis, the article examines the circulation of Neeta's labor, her spatial exclusion, disruptions in the soundtrack, bodily exhaustion, and the social repetition staged in the final sequence.

Melodrama: The Affective Form of Social Contradiction

Melodrama is not limited to established plot conventions; it is a narrative mode that structures social and moral conflict through emotional intensity. For Brooks (1976/1985), it responds aesthetically to the search for moral meaning following the erosion of traditional systems of value. Elsaesser (1972) similarly locates conflicts that cannot be directly articulated in gesture, music, mise-en-scène, and excess. Gledhill (1987) emphasizes the relation between everyday experience and ideology, while Williams (1998) treats melodrama as a central narrative mode of modern culture. Together, these approaches identify its critical capacity to give affective form to historically specific contradictions of class, gender, and family.

This capacity is particularly evident in family melodrama. The family is an intimate sphere, but also an institution through which economic dependencies and social roles are reproduced. Engels (1884/2010) treats it not as a natural and immutable unit but as a structure shaped by historical and social relations. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the family becomes the site where post-Partition class decline

and gendered labor are reproduced. Its dependence on Neeta's paid labor and unpaid care labor is inseparable from the normalization of that work through sacrifice and familial responsibility, linking her individual suffering to class dependency and the gendered division of labor. A social-reproduction perspective helps specify this mechanism: the paid and unpaid work that sustains the household is indispensable but is treated as a feminine obligation rather than acknowledged as labor (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2016).

The Historical and Aesthetic Position of Ritwik Ghatak's Cinema

Ritwik Ghatak (1925–1976) occupied a distinctive position within the alternative aesthetic and political currents of post-independence Indian cinema. His work with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) shaped his understanding of theater and cinema as instruments of social transformation, while his films anticipated tendencies later associated with Parallel Cinema or the Indian New Wave. Within a cinematic culture concerned with poverty, inequality, and displacement, Ghatak joined realism to melodramatic excess (Bhaskar, 2013, p. 20; Dass, 2020, p. 16; Vahali, 2020, p. 28).

For Ghatak, melodrama did not oppose social reality. Realism established the material ground of the narrative, while melodramatic intensity registered the emotional and bodily effects of those conditions. Partition, displacement, class decline, and the loss of belonging consequently shape economic circumstances, family relations, and expectations for the future. Screams, gestures, and formal excess resist moral reconciliation and cathartic closure, presenting individual suffering as a symptom of historical trauma and social conflict. Sarkar's concept of "epic melodrama" describes this relation between personal suffering and historical process (2009, pp. 209–210).

This aesthetic is also connected to Ghatak's Marxism. Class decline, exploitation, and inequality become concrete through everyday life, family dependency, and the narrowing choices available to characters (Rajadhyaksha & Gangar, 1987, p. 103; Sarkar, 2009, pp. 208–209). Ideology operates less

through explicit messages than through the material conditions shaping desire, choice, and relationships, allowing social contradictions to be experienced emotionally and formally.

The Traumatic Continuity of Partition

The Partition of British India in 1947 produced mass displacement, economic insecurity, and class disintegration in Bengal. Refugee movement toward Calcutta accelerated the impoverishment and proletarianization of lower-middle-class families (Dass, 2020, p. ix; Mehta & Mookerjea-Leonard, 2015, pp. 3–4). Under these conditions, the family remained a potential site of solidarity while also reproducing dependency and exploitation. In Ghatak’s cinema, Partition therefore appears less as the melancholic memory of a lost homeland than as a force reshaping economic relations and familial responsibilities.

Ghatak’s films are organized around the social, political, and existential crises set in motion by Partition (Chattopadhyay & Ganguly, 2023, p. 132; Dass, 2020, p. 7). Partition persists in everyday life through displacement, class decline, and lost belonging, and Ghatak’s separation from East Bengal made this rupture a thematic and formal foundation of his cinema. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ghatak, 1960), *Komal Gandhar* (Ghatak, 1961), and *Subarnarekha* (Ghatak, 1965), commonly described as the “Partition Trilogy,” trace its continuing effects through lost homes, fragmented families, inaccessible homelands, and foreclosed futures (Dass, 2020, p. 7; Mukherjee, 2016, p. 139). Ghatak’s description of Partition as a “false and fraudulent independence” reflects his view that national independence remained bound to cultural fragmentation and social disintegration (Vahali, 2018, p. 94).

Rather than representing Partition primarily through mass violence, Ghatak turns to refugee poverty, lost homeland, and family fragmentation (Mandal, 2008, p. 69). Trauma remains a material and emotional force shaping the present, and melodrama connects this individual suffering to collective history.

Marxist Melodrama, Left Melodrama, and Left Melancholy

Benjamin's "left melancholy" criticizes leftist tendencies that reduce a revolutionary position to an aesthetic or intellectual stance (1931/2005). The problem is not the absence of political awareness but the failure of critical knowledge and emancipatory desire to become praxis. Brown likewise argues that melancholic attachment to past political ideals may obstruct the recognition of present possibilities and the development of a new political language (1999). Traverso (2016), however, emphasizes that remembering defeat can recover suppressed political experiences and bring unrealized possibilities of emancipation into the present. In the present reading, left melancholy names the tension between the political inertia criticized by Benjamin and Brown and the unrealized emancipatory possibilities emphasized by Traverso.

Anker's (2012) account of left melodrama connects this tension to the political work performed by melodramatic narratives. By presenting oppression and inequality with emotional and moral clarity, left melodrama can expose injustice while risking the reduction of structural relations to a cruel power and an innocent victim. Its clarity is therefore a source of both critical force and political limitation.

"Marxist melodrama" does not designate an autonomous genre in this article. It names the historical-materialist operation through which melodramatic narrative situates individual suffering within labor, class, exploitation, and material dependency rather than reducing conflict to personal choice or moral failure. This disclosure need not culminate in collective struggle or revolutionary resolution. Debates over Marxist approaches to melodrama register the difficulty of relating formal critique to political transformation (McConachie & Gerould, 1994). Jameson (1979) likewise suggests that mass-cultural narratives may encode utopian desires within the limits of the existing order.

The three concepts therefore perform distinct but complementary tasks. Marxist melodrama identifies the material and class relations behind individual suffering; left melodrama accounts for the political force and limitations of their melodramatic presentation; and left melancholy describes the

tension between remembered defeat and unrealized emancipation. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* organizes this relation through Neeta's labor and sacrifice: its disclosure of post-Partition displacement and class decline gives it a Marxist melodramatic operation, its failure to reach a transformative political horizon brings it closer to left melodrama, and the preservation of Neeta's belated demand to live gives it a left-melancholic dimension.

The Formal Construction of Marxist Melodrama in Ghatak's Cinema

Ghatak's reworking of melodramatic form can be understood in relation to the "philosophical and psychological Marxism" that Rajadhyaksha and Gangar associate with his work, rather than as the illustration of a specific party line (Rajadhyaksha & Gangar, 1987, p. 103). His view of cinema as a medium capable of reaching broad sections of society belongs to the same political-aesthetic orientation.

This approach operates through material dependency, the distribution of labor within the family, economic necessity, and the restriction of personal desire rather than theoretical exposition or direct political messaging. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, dependence on Neeta's paid labor and unpaid care labor shows how love, responsibility, and feminine sacrifice can legitimize exploitation. The film's Marxist character lies in disclosing the material relations shaping its characters rather than arranging them within simple moral oppositions.

Ghatak's defense of melodrama as a culturally meaningful expressive mode, rather than a merely excessive popular convention, provides an aesthetic basis for this approach (Dasgupta & Bhattacharya, 2003, pp. 76–80). Mythological references are repositioned within modern social contradictions rather than used to produce ahistorical meanings (Dasgupta & Bhattacharya, 2003, p. 76). Neeta's association with protective and self-sacrificing female figures elevates her sacrifice while exposing its material cost, bringing the film's class and feminist dimensions together through the tension between mythological meaning and the family economy.

The same political-aesthetic structure informs the film's use of sound, framing, and spatial organization, which sustains melodramatic identification while introducing critical distance (Sarkar, 2009, pp. 228–229; Rajadhyaksha & Gangar, 1987, p. 60; Raychaudhuri, 2009, p. 480). These formal interruptions may be related to Brecht's (2014) concept of estrangement, but they do not eliminate emotion or dissolve the viewer's bond with Neeta. The following scene-based analyses examine how this tension takes shape through domestic space, sound, bodily exhaustion, and the final sequence.

Plot Summary

Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ghatak, 1960) follows a middle-class family living in a refugee settlement near Calcutta in the aftermath of the Partition of Bengal. As the family's economic circumstances worsen, Neeta assumes primary responsibility for supporting the household. She gives the family the money she earns from private tutoring and her job, repeatedly postponing her own education and plans for the future. Her older brother Shankar continues his musical training in the hope of becoming a successful singer, while her younger brother Montu enters the workforce. Her sister Geeta becomes increasingly concerned with her own prospects for marriage. Neeta gradually becomes both the family's principal wage earner and the person responsible for its members' emotional and everyday needs.

Neeta's sacrifices also shape her private life. Although she hopes to build a future with Sanat, whom she loves, she postpones marriage because of her family's needs. Sanat gradually distances himself from her and eventually marries Geeta. Despite losing the future she had imagined for herself, Neeta continues to help with the wedding preparations and support her family. Shankar recognizes that the family is exploiting her, but leaves home to pursue his own artistic career. When Montu is injured at the factory, the burden of care once again falls to Neeta. Meanwhile, her exhaustion and symptoms of illness become increasingly pronounced. She conceals her condition for a long time, however, so that she will not become a burden on her family and can continue working.

When Shankar returns as an established singer, he learns that Neeta has tuberculosis and arranges for her treatment at a sanatorium in the mountains. His intervention comes only after she has been physically and emotionally exhausted. During Shankar's visit to the sanatorium, Neeta learns that the family has carried on and established a new domestic order in her absence. She then embraces her brother and repeatedly cries out, "I want to live." The film does not establish what happens to Neeta after this scene.

Film Analysis

In Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, melodrama is not simply a narrative pattern for conveying individual suffering. It is a critical form that makes perceptible the class insecurity, patriarchal division of labor, and care work of a family displaced by Partition. The exploitation Neeta experiences is too deeply embedded in the family's material organization to be reduced to the personal failings of its individual members. The household's subsistence, educational aspirations, marriage arrangements, and plans for the future all depend on her paid labor and unpaid care labor, yet her contribution is treated as a natural form of sacrifice. The historical violence of Partition therefore persists beyond the memory of a lost homeland in everyday decisions about who must work, who must wait, and who must relinquish a future of her own (Dass, 2020, p. ix; Mehta & Mookerjee-Leonard, 2015, pp. 3–4).

The film constructs this historical and class order through formal choices that produce melodramatic identification and critical distance at once. Its emphasis on Neeta's face, body, and voice creates emotional proximity to her experience. Yet train sounds, whip-like blows, thunder, ringing tones, and abrupt musical shifts combine with differences in focus, grilles, thresholds, and foreground-background contrasts to prevent that proximity from resolving into consolatory catharsis. Neeta's suffering retains its emotional force while being linked to the family economy and the gender order; melodramatic intensity and critical distance remain active within the same formal structure.

The Family Economy and Neeta's Gendered Labor

In the film's treatment of the family, exploitation does not arise primarily from a single external act of coercion. It takes shape within everyday relations in which love, responsibility, and necessity are difficult to separate. As the displaced middle-class family loses its economic security after Partition, the boundary between labor and kinship becomes increasingly unstable. Neeta's earnings initially appear to be one family member's contribution, but gradually become an indispensable resource sustaining the entire household. The film develops this dependency through ordinary transactions and events: the handing over of money, expectations surrounding education, wedding preparations, and the disregard of Neeta's illness. The family cannot be understood as a protected sphere outside relations of economic exploitation and unequal social reproduction. It is a space in which labor is obscured by being cast as a natural duty and a form of feminine sacrifice. Neeta's experience shows how the class consequences of displacement are distributed along gendered lines within the household (Dass, 2020, p. 30; Hood, 2000, p. 27). The film thereby anticipates a central insight of social-reproduction theory: labor that sustains daily life is systematically obscured when it is identified with women's presumed natural responsibilities (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2016).

The scene in which Neeta gives her earnings to her mother captures the everyday operation of this arrangement. The exchange takes place in the courtyard amid the water pump, cooking utensils, and domestic activity, placing paid labor alongside reproductive labor within the same space. Although Neeta supports the household financially, her contribution is absorbed into the ordinary functioning of family life. Rather than being celebrated as an exceptional sacrifice, her economic support disappears into an obligation that has become continuous.

The scene's soundscape reinforces this relationship. The sounds of the water pump, animals, utensils, and schoolchildren continue beneath the conversation. Through this acoustic continuity, the exchange of money ceases to be an abstract economic transaction and becomes part of the daily rhythm of social reproduction. The sounds from the school can also be heard as a reminder that Neeta's

earnings sustain more than immediate needs: the family's educational aspirations and hopes for the future. Her support is presented not as a single heroic act, but as an unbroken necessity.

The connection between education and financial provision becomes more explicit when the mother says that Neeta should not marry. Neeta's education is treated less as a possible route to autonomy than as the basis of her ability to earn income for the family. In the background, girls reciting in unison situate this decision within a wider educational and gendered environment rather than allowing it to remain an entirely private family matter. Education consequently assumes a contradictory role, poised between the possibility of emancipation and the obligation to support the household.

Neeta's postponement of marriage and her responsibility for Geeta's wedding preparations disclose the concrete forms of labor contained within sacrifice. Clothing, food preparation, the crowd, and movement through the courtyard show that the celebration depends on extensive care and preparatory work. As Neeta loses the possibilities attached to her own future, she continues performing the labor that makes her sister's marriage possible. The soundtrack shifts from cheerful percussion to scattered instrumental sounds and then to a sorrowful melody. The festive atmosphere remains, but Neeta's exclusion within it becomes audible. Care work here acquires a form in which affection and self-denial cannot be readily separated.

Neeta's sacrifice is associated with Jagaddhatri, a figure in the Hindu Shakti tradition whose name means "the bearer of the world." This association elevates her assumption of the family's economic and emotional burdens even as it risks legitimizing her labor as a natural and limitless feminine duty. Deification does not counter exploitation; it becomes an ideological form that conceals it beneath discourses of love, motherhood, and virtue (Acharyya, 2018, p. 87; Menon, 2012, pp. 54–85). Shankar's perspective likewise interprets Neeta's labor as a sacred capacity for care (Mukherjee, 2017, p. 42; Natarajan, 2018, p. 183). The transfer of her earnings, the reduction of education to an obligation

to generate income, and the assignment of wedding preparations to her nevertheless expose the material cost of this elevation.

Neeta's position within the family is determined by the overlap between her role as an income-earning subject and her naturalized role as caregiver. The scenes examined here establish the family as the central site at which class, patriarchy, and melodrama converge. The obscuring of Neeta's labor is not confined to the distribution of economic resources; it continues in the architecture of the house and in the positions the frame assigns to her.

Domestic Space, Framing, and Neeta's Visual Marginalization

The house is not a neutral backdrop or simply a place of refuge for the family. It is a social space that organizes relations of belonging, service, and exclusion. The courtyard, rooms, doors, windows, and grilles visually define the characters' positions within the household. Although Neeta's economic contribution is central to the family's survival, her body is often placed at the edge of the frame, behind another figure, in an out-of-focus plane, or beyond an architectural barrier. Her marginalization does not consist in her complete disappearance from the image. Rather, even when visible, she remains outside the domains of authority and recognition. The film gives spatial form to melodrama's capacity to render social contradictions perceptible (Kolker, 2016).

The arrangement of the courtyard in the previously discussed scene where Neeta hands over her earnings marks an early stage in this process. Although she shares the space with her mother and Shankar, the center of the frame is not reserved for her. Her role in maintaining the family's material continuity does not grant her sustained visual dominance; instead, her contribution is absorbed into the routines of domestic life. The scene establishes a pronounced contrast between her economic centrality and her peripheral position within the frame.

This separation continues through the organization of focus in the scene where Neeta discusses postponing marriage. She occupies the blurred foreground, while Shankar appears in sharp focus

behind her. Physical proximity to the camera does not give Neeta perceptual priority. The juxtaposition of her profile in close-up with Geeta's shadowed face differentiates the two women within the same affective structure. Although Neeta carries the family's economic and emotional burdens, she gains no comparable authority over her own future.

When the family receives news of Montu's injury, Neeta appears in a darkened, partially cropped foreground. The father occupies the center of the frame with the letter, while the mother is positioned in a brighter background. Neeta's proximity to the camera again fails to provide visual clarity. The low lighting, partial cropping, and signs of physical discomfort place her at the threshold of the image. As attention settles on the news and the father's figure, her exhausted body is relegated to a secondary position.

Architectural barriers become more pronounced as Neeta's illness develops. Close-ups framed through grilles, divisions of focus, and the darkened room bring her bodily vulnerability and exclusion from family life into the same visual arrangement. When Shankar realizes that she has tuberculosis, the bloodstained cloth that falls to the floor marks the point at which her illness can no longer be concealed. Yet its recognition does not lead to the timely, collective provision of care within the family.

Taken together, these scenes trace a gradual spatial constriction rather than a sudden act of exclusion. Neeta's body moves from the different depths of the courtyard to the blurred foreground, the darkened and cropped edge of the frame, the face behind a grille, and finally the dark room. As the family's dependence on her labor increases, the space allotted to her own needs contracts. Once her illness becomes visible, that dependency does not develop into a shared responsibility for care; it instead accelerates her exclusion.

The house consequently becomes a contradictory space: it benefits from Neeta's labor but offers no lasting place for her body. Framing, focus, and architectural barriers give material form to this contradiction without requiring explicit verbal explanation. Neeta's visibility does not amount to

recognition, just as her presence in close-up does not grant her subjective centrality. The proximity produced through grilles, shadow, and blur prevents emotional identification from reaching a consolatory closure. The same tension continues at the sonic level through the motifs examined in the following section.

The Sonic Disruption of Melodramatic Identification

The sound design of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* does more than reinforce the emotional meaning of the image. Music, ambient sound, and sudden sonic interventions sometimes intensify the identification generated by performance; at other moments, they make emotion more difficult to consume without resistance. The train and whip motifs provide the clearest examples of this dual function. Rather than assuming in advance that these sounds are “alienating,” it is necessary to consider when they begin, which visual events they accompany, and how they affect the other layers of the soundtrack. The persistence of everyday environmental sounds connects dramatic conversations to the social space around them. Sudden interventions that lack an identifiable source within the story world or are emphasized beyond ordinary acoustic realism interrupt the apparent continuity of the melodramatic moment. Critical distance emerges through these specific sonic arrangements.

In the scene where Sanat first takes Neeta’s hand, the sound of a train accompanies their romantic intimacy. The two characters appear together by the river, and their growing closeness is given physical form through the act of holding hands. A train whistle is heard at the precise moment of contact, and the train then enters the frame. Its sound quickly overtakes the insects, birds, and string textures, coming to dominate the acoustic field. The intervention is not entirely offscreen, since the train that produces the sound is visible. Even so, its arrival at the moment their hands meet prevents the scene from settling into a musical accompaniment that simply affirms romantic intimacy. The train introduces associations of movement, separation, and historical displacement into the privacy of their touch.

The later encounter between Sanat and Neeta extends the relational meaning of the train motif. Neeta does not wish to speak, but when Sanat takes her arm, the sound of a train connects their meeting to their earlier intimacy and briefly opens a space of contact between them. The motif works as a leitmotif linking different stages of the romantic relationship. Neeta, however, no longer has the strength to listen to Sanat. In the final image of the scene, he continues speaking in the foreground while she moves away beneath an open umbrella. The increasingly rapid whip-like strokes that accompany the opening of the umbrella sharpen the sonic force of their separation. The image confirms that Neeta is moving away from Sanat in physical space. Since the sounds have no diegetic source, they cannot be understood as an actual whipping within the story world. The blows can instead be read as translating emotional separation into a sensation of material impact. Their harsh repetition does not contain the injury of separation within an uninterrupted flow of pity. It heightens the melodramatic intensity while making the formal construction of that intensity audible.

The same sonic device is used more forcefully in the scene where Shankar tells Neeta that he intends to leave home. Dark images of the interior give way to Shankar's anxiety and an extreme close-up of Neeta's face as she sings through tears. Her direct expression of emotion provides a strong basis for identification with her accumulated suffering. When the two begin to speak openly, the music recedes. The song they sing together separates them from the surrounding sounds. It is followed by three whip cracks synchronized with strokes of the stringed instruments, and then by lamentation and sobbing. Sound does not replace the emotion already present in the scene; Neeta's face and song have established its melodramatic intensity. The whip cracks intervene abruptly in that intensity, allowing the pain to be perceived as more than a psychological experience—as a form of social pressure exerted on the body.

The scene's critical force becomes clearer when the sequence of its sound layers is examined, rather than when the whip sound is assigned an isolated symbolic meaning. Environmental sounds and speech come first, followed by the song that separates the siblings from their surroundings. Three sharp

blows interrupt the song, after which lamentation and sobbing are heard. This progression builds toward an intensified registration of intimate suffering. The harsh intervention at the emotional climax makes it difficult for that intimacy to resolve into consolatory catharsis. The interruption of catharsis therefore need not remain an abstract label. It can be located in the way sound breaks the emotional flow and introduces a disturbing excess into the scene. Identification is nevertheless not abolished. Neeta's face and voice retain their emotional weight. Pity is not erased but connected to the familial and social conditions that produce it.

Everyday ambience is as important as these sudden sonic interventions. The sounds of students, the courtyard water pump, animals, and cooking utensils often continue after the dialogue has ended. In another scene, the voices of schoolgirls reciting grow louder while the mother links Neeta's education to her obligation to support the family. These sounds prevent the dialogue from remaining an isolated expression of individual psychology. The imbalance between speech and ambience is less a technical defect than a form of emphasis that distributes the scene's meaning across different sonic layers. At certain moments, environmental sound overtakes the spoken word, making audible the broader social setting in which family decisions are made. Sound introduces a social plurality that the image alone does not carry.

These examples show that the relation between melodramatic excess and critical distance is not linear. The train sound opens romantic intimacy to associations of movement and historical displacement. The three whip cracks add a bodily sense of violence to moments of emotional confession and recognition. The train connects romantic contact with separation, the whip-like strokes intensify rupture, and thunder gives sonic force to the disclosure of illness. Yet these sounds are not foreign elements detached from the narrative. They relate directly to the touch, the face, and the movement away that appear in the image. Critical distance arises from this relation. The soundtrack ceases to be a background that merely intensifies emotion; it interrupts and reorganizes the forms of

contact and loss. The emotional bond with Neeta remains intact, but it becomes more difficult to confine that bond to passive pity.

Sonic interruption gives melodramatic identification a critical direction rather than eliminating it. Everyday ambience connects individual speech to the surrounding social world, while sudden interventions such as the train, the whip cracks, and thunder prevent the emotional climax from ending in smooth relief. The bodily effect of these sounds also makes it inadequate to treat Neeta's illness as an isolated biological event. Her illness must instead be considered within the narrative continuity formed by paid labor, the burden of care, lack of rest, and delayed treatment.

Labor, Illness, and Bodily Exhaustion

The film does not establish that overwork directly causes Neeta's tuberculosis. It instead constructs a narrative continuity among paid labor, unpaid care, insufficient rest, the concealment of symptoms, delayed treatment, and bodily exhaustion. Neeta is repeatedly denied the time and support needed to attend to her own health, making the management of illness inseparable from the household's unequal distribution of care.

The first signs of this process appear as Neeta prioritizes work and her family's needs over her own need for rest. Her concealment of fatigue and physical discomfort indicates that bodily exhaustion begins before the moment of diagnosis. In the scene where she leaves Sanat's apartment, her perspiring face and hands clasped at her throat suggest a general state of physical strain. These signs do not in themselves constitute evidence of tuberculosis, however; they indicate physical discomfort rather than establishing a specific diagnosis.

When more pronounced symptoms such as fever and dizziness emerge, Neeta continues to conceal them. In the hospital scenes involving Montu, the hospital is associated with Neeta's position as caregiver before it becomes connected to her own illness. Montu is shown lying in bed, while Neeta remains standing and searches for a solution on his behalf. The dizziness and ringing she experiences

during this sequence foreground the disturbance of her bodily perception without interrupting the narrative's movement.

The scene in which Neeta coughs up blood marks the point at which her symptoms can no longer be hidden. Close-ups framed through a grille and extreme close-ups of her eyes bring her face nearer to the viewer while fragmenting it within the frame. The separation of focus between Neeta and her mother suggests that the relation of care does not develop into reciprocal intimacy. The viewer does not see the inside of the handkerchief, but the continuous coughing, lamentation, ringing, and accelerating string sounds make the presence of illness unmistakable. The bodily symptom is organized at once as a private fear and as an event noticed within the household.

Before the film provides an explicit diagnosis, the flow of sound establishes illness as a form of sensory pressure. Lamentation, ringing, and accelerating sounds accumulate around Neeta's coughing, intensifying the scene's bodily tension. Emotional proximity to her fear is maintained, while the excess of the soundtrack also calls attention to the formal representation of illness. Melodramatic identification and critical distance are therefore produced within the same sonic structure. Illness becomes the bodily concentration of tensions that have accumulated across the earlier scenes of labor and invisibility.

Shankar's discovery of Neeta's illness makes the familial consequences of her bodily exhaustion perceptible. The image of Neeta covering her mouth behind a grilled window joins her attempt to conceal the illness with a spatial barrier. Thunder and lamentation accompany the bloodstained cloth she has hidden from her brother as it falls to the floor, creating a moment of recognition in which her condition can no longer be ignored. The father's accusatory gesture and Neeta's tears invite a reading of this recognition as shadowed by blame and exclusion, rather than accompanied by immediate care and solidarity. Neeta's isolation in the darkened room, from which she watches the family outside, shows bodily exhaustion developing into social isolation.

These scenes construct Neeta's physical collapse gradually, through increasingly restricted spaces of movement, rest, and human connection, rather than through a single dramatic event. Paid labor and the burden of care cannot be claimed to have medically caused her tuberculosis. The narrative nonetheless makes clear that Neeta is given insufficient opportunity to rest, receive treatment, or obtain care. Her body becomes a material surface on which the limits of the family economy's sustainability become perceptible.

Neeta's body is where class, patriarchy, and the history of Partition converge within everyday life. The displaced family's precarity increases its need for income, while the patriarchal division of labor joins that need to the duties of care and sacrifice assigned to Neeta. Familial love obscures the coercive character of this burden, but bodily exhaustion exposes the relations beneath it. From the perspective of Traverso's (2016) account of left melancholy, this loss points beyond past defeat to the continual postponement of a shared possibility of emancipation that has yet to be realized. Neeta's body bears both the cost and the material record of this postponement.

The film organizes illness as the bodily concentration of a chain linking labor, care, and invisibility. Fatigue, coughing, the concealment of illness, and spatial isolation accumulate over time. The resulting process shows that the family keeps Neeta within the household for as long as it depends on her labor; once her need for care becomes undeniable, she is directed toward a delayed course of treatment that removes her from the family's shared life.

Exclusion, Belated Rescue, and Suspended Political Possibility

The transition between the discovery of Neeta's illness and her departure from the house shows that recognizing her condition does not automatically lead to an organized structure of care. The family does not respond to the economic and emotional support she has provided for years by assuming a shared responsibility for her well-being. Instead, the recognition of her illness makes her position within the household still more precarious. This does not mean that the family members are entirely

without compassion. The film also contains regret, fear, helplessness, and belated attempts at protection. Yet these emotions do not develop into coordinated action capable of supporting Neeta before her illness becomes acute. Here, political possibility becomes suspended at the level of the family. The problem is recognized repeatedly and at different stages, but this awareness never produces a shared decision capable of altering the family's structural dependence on Neeta's labor.

In the scene of Neeta's departure, exclusion is articulated through the visual relation between a childhood photograph and the rain-soaked ground. Neeta first sees the photograph on the table, then carries it with her belongings as she leaves the house in the storm and rain. At the doorway, the frame slips from her hand and breaks. Moving the photograph from the room to the exterior turns her departure into more than a simple change of place. As a material sign of belonging to the family, the photograph's destruction in the rain makes perceptible the threat that Neeta will be pushed outside the family's memory.

The scene's sound design links this material exclusion to associations of marriage and departure. As the storm intensifies, a traditional song about brides leaving their family homes is heard. The music stops when Neeta steps outside, followed by the sound of the frame breaking. This sequence reverses the socially recognized transition of marriage. Neeta's departure does not mark her entry into a new form of life; it expresses her removal from the family because of illness. The bridal song opens an interpretive space around this contrast, while its interruption at the moment she leaves makes audible the inadequacy of the ritual frame to contain her departure.

The return of the main theme with the proposal of treatment is an important indication that political possibility has not been completely foreclosed. Shankar's intervention is a concrete attempt to preserve Neeta's life. It comes, however, only after she has been physically and socially removed from the household, rather than while the relations of exploitation are being established. The possibility of rescue remains, but it arrives too late. Neeta's treatment stays at the level of Shankar's personal act of

care and cannot retrospectively transform the gendered division of labor on which the family economy has depended. The film does not eliminate hope altogether. It shows, rather, that hope can emerge only under belated conditions. The distance between political possibility and the capacity to realize it supports an understanding of suspension rather than closure.

The conversation between Neeta and Shankar at the sanatorium restages the limits of belated rescue within an open mountainous landscape. After the visual enclosure of grilles and darkened rooms, the open setting carries an association with liberation. Yet no social transformation accompanies this spatial openness. The embrace between Neeta and Shankar suggests that care and recognition remain possible, even if they arrive late. Before the embrace, Neeta's declaration, "I want to live," gives direct expression to her demand for life and exposes how belatedly the possibility of care has appeared.

The Final Cry, Social Repetition, and Melodrama Without Closure

Neeta's repeated cry of "I want to live" in the final sequence is, first and foremost, a personal and material demand for life. To turn it directly into an abstract symbol of resistance would risk obscuring its bodily dimension. Neeta's movement toward Shankar, her embrace of him, and the physical intensity of her cry support this personal meaning. At the same time, the way her voice spreads through the surrounding space amid echoes, lamentation, ringing, and thunder—and is then linked to the movement of another young woman—allows for a historical and collective reading. The film does not state this collective meaning explicitly; it emerges as a defensible reading of the visual and sonic repetitions.

In the final scene, the sandal of a young woman walking through the settlement breaks, but she continues on her way. The image does not identify this woman with Neeta. What matters is the repetition of material vulnerability in another female body. The broken sandal is a concrete sign of everyday deprivation. Her continued movement does not itself constitute organized resistance; instead,

it suggests that the conditions of deprivation outlast Neeta's individual story. Shankar's gaze toward the young woman also creates a visual connection between the sense of loss surrounding Neeta and a broader social experience.

The sound design strengthens this connection. The ringing tones, mournful melody, and song about brides leaving their family homes, carried over from the sanatorium sequence, accompany the image of the young woman and the moment when her sandal breaks. Their continuation over the black screen after the image has ended prevents the narrative from closing around a completed fate or a consolatory process of mourning. Neeta's loss, the other woman's continued movement, and the lingering sounds remain suspended in relation to one another. Consolatory catharsis is frustrated not because the emotional intensity diminishes, but because suffering cannot be confined safely to a completed past.

The similarity in framing, scale, and editing between the images of the broken sandal at the beginning and end of the film frames Neeta's life through a motif of material repetition. This repetition supports the interpretation that her experience is not an isolated exception. The sandal gives concrete form to historical and social contradictions through the fragility of an everyday object, while also evoking a system of social reproduction dependent on women's labor. By connecting Neeta's suffering to exploitation within the family, class insecurity, and the patriarchal organization of care, the film extends this structure toward another female figure. Yet it depicts no collective organization, solidarity, or transformed family order. Political desire becomes perceptible, but the process capable of realizing it remains absent (Rajadhyaksha & Gangar, 1987, p. 60; Vahali, 2020, pp. 235–236).

The collective meaning of the ending must therefore be established with caution. Sarkar's account of the relation between personal loss and historical rupture in Ghatak's cinema, together with Ghatak's treatment of emotional excess as a means of disclosing social truth, supports this interpretation (Ghatak, 2000, p. 81; Sarkar, 2009, pp. 228–229). Neeta's cry directly expresses her desire to live,

while its reverberation, the broken sandal, and the woman who continues walking extend that demand toward an unrealized possibility of a less exploitative shared life. The film does not construct a collective subject or political process capable of realizing this desire. Rather than closing melodramatic emotion, it carries that emotion into a pattern of social repetition, preserving the demand for life as a deferred and suspended political possibility.

Conclusion

This study has approached melodrama not as a genre confined to emotional excess and moral opposition, but as a political-aesthetic form that makes historical and social contradictions perceptible. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* has been examined as a Marxist melodramatic structure that works through the displacement, class decline, and exploitation of gendered labor produced in the aftermath of the Partition of Bengal, locating these processes in Neeta's everyday experience and bodily exhaustion. The film brings these contradictions into view, yet it does not carry them toward collective political action or a fully realized horizon of transformation. It therefore occupies a tense position between Marxist melodrama and left melodrama, while this tension also acquires a left-melancholic dimension.

The film's Marxist melodramatic character derives not from the direct articulation of theoretical concepts, but from its ability to make the material relations underlying Neeta's individual suffering visible and audible. The family sustains itself largely through her paid labor and unpaid care labor. Her work, however, is presented as a natural obligation within discourses of love, responsibility, and sacrifice. Neeta's moral and mythological elevation obscures the material character of her labor, while the film brings the classed and gendered exploitation beneath that elevation into sharper relief. The convergence of paid labor and care work in her experience shows how class dependency is reproduced within the family through a patriarchal division of labor. The film's class analysis cannot, for this reason, be separated from a feminist critique of labor.

This political operation is constructed through space, framing, sound, and the body as well as through the narrative. The contrast between Neeta's central position in the family economy and her spatial exclusion within the home finds visual form in selective focus, architectural barriers, and the gradual constriction of her living space. Sudden sonic interventions, train sounds, whip-like blows, and breaks in the music intensify suffering without allowing the emotional flow to resolve into consolatory catharsis. These interruptions do not eliminate the viewer's emotional bond with Neeta. Instead, they make it more difficult to consume her suffering as a private misfortune and direct attention toward its relation to the family economy, class insecurity, and the gender order.

Neeta's illness cannot be interpreted as the direct medical consequence of her conditions of work and care. The film nevertheless establishes a strong narrative continuity among paid labor, the burden of care, lack of rest, the concealment of illness, delayed treatment, and bodily exhaustion. Neeta's body bears the traces of post-Partition insecurity as they are mediated by class and gender. Her body is therefore not reduced to an abstract symbol of historical trauma. It becomes a surface on which the limits of the family economy's sustainability, and the cost of the women's labor that sustains it, become perceptible.

The disclosure of structural contradictions does not, however, produce a collective political subject capable of transforming them. Neeta's cry that she wants to live first expresses a personal and material demand. Yet the sonic intensity with which her cry spreads into the surrounding space, together with the repetition of the broken sandal motif in the figure of another young woman, suggests that her experience cannot be confined to an isolated tragedy. The film connects Neeta's experience to material vulnerability repeated in another female body, but it depicts no collective organization, solidarity, or transformed social order. Political possibility is not completely foreclosed; the subject and process required to realize it remain absent.

Marxist melodrama accounts for the material and class relations beneath individual suffering; Anker's (2012) concept of left melodrama clarifies how a critique may expose those relations yet struggle to imagine their collective transformation; and left melancholy describes the suspension of an unrealized desire for emancipation (Benjamin, 1931/2005; Traverso, 2016). Taken together, these concepts show that the film's political force cannot be separated from its political limitations. The political force of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* lies not in resolving its contradictions, but in making their effects on everyday relations, emotions, and bodies available to experience. Its limitation lies in its inability to carry that experience toward a collective political subject and transformative action.

This analysis suggests that it may be insufficient to define political cinema solely through explicit political messages, organized struggles, or an affirmative collective subject. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, political force emerges less through the representation of a solution than through the emotional and formal organization of historical contradictions. Melodramatic intensity makes the bodily weight of exploitation felt, while formal interruptions prevent suffering from ending as personal destiny or within a closed narrative of mourning. Visibility, however, is not identical to transformation. The film makes a collective need audible without representing a collective solution; it discloses the conditions that make political action necessary without depicting that action. The political character of melodrama must therefore be considered both in its capacity to turn historical contradictions into experience and in the limits through which those contradictions remain unresolved and political desire is held in suspension.

Editor's note: Additional scholarship

In addition to the scholarship already discussed, Arslan (2026) reads the sound, lighting, and framing of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* as a counter-memory of gendered labor and displacement, which bears directly on the scene-based analysis here, and Diken Yücel and Gökmen (2026), also in this issue of CINEJ, examine how Turkish women viewers interpreted Neeta's sacrifice, family obligation, and the film's melodramatic conventions. Erdem (2026) reads

Ghatak's Partition Trilogy through cognitive estrangement, which complements the discussion of formal interruption, and Banerjee (2023), in *CINEJ*, examines how bhadralok cultural memory shapes class and gender in Ghatak's films. O'Donnell (2004) reads Neeta as a sacrificed goddess figure and attends to the film's sound, including the amplified boiling kettle, which bears on the article's discussion of Neeta's elevation and the film's sonic design. These sources have been included where directly relevant; the interpretive claims remain those of the authors.

REFERENCES

- Acharyya, S. (2018). Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*: A feminist reading of the film's vocal structure. *Ars et Praxis*, 6, 84–95.
- Anker, E. (2012). Left melodrama. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 11(2), 130–152.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/cpt.2011.10>
- Arslan, R. (2026). Counter-memory and gendered trauma in Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*: Melodrama, sound, and Partition. *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, 14(2), 703–729.
<https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2026.992>
- Banerjee, S. (2023). Reading bhadralok cultural memory, kitsch and culture industry in Ritwik Ghatak's films. *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, 11(2), 21–49.
<https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2023.422>
- Benjamin, W. (2005). Left-wing melancholy (On Erich Kästner's new book of poems) (R. Livingstone, Trans.). In M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland, & G. Smith (Eds.), *Selected writings: Vol. 2, Part 2. 1931–1934* (pp. 423–427). Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1931)
- Bhaskar, I. (2013). The Indian New Wave. In K. M. Gokulsing & W. Dissanayake (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of Indian cinemas* (pp. 19–33). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203556054.ch3>
- Bhattacharya, T. (Ed.). (2017). *Social reproduction theory: Remapping class, recentering oppression*. Pluto Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vz494j>

- Brecht, B. (2014). *Brecht on theatre: The development of an aesthetic* (M. Silberman, S. Giles, & T. Kuhn, Eds.; 3rd ed.). Bloomsbury.
- Brooks, P. (1985). *The melodramatic imagination: Balzac, Henry James, melodrama, and the mode of excess*. Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1976)
- Brown, W. (1999). Resisting left melancholy. *boundary 2*, 26(3), 19–27.
- Chattopadhyay, S., & Ganguly, D. K. (2023). Ritual as intermedial interjection in Ritwik Ghatak's *The Cloud-Capped Star*. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, 24, 131–155. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ausfm-2023-0017>
- Dasgupta, S., & Bhattacharya, S. (2003). *Ritwik Ghatak: Face to face—Conversations with the master, 1962–1977* (C. Ghosh, Trans.). Cine Central.
- Dass, M. (2020). *The Cloud-Capped Star (Meghe Dhaka Tara)*. British Film Institute.
- Diken Yücel, D., & Gökmen, E. (2026). Ritwik Ghatak's cinema as a space for intercultural encounter: The reception of the film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) by Turkish female audiences. *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, 14(2), 747–778. <https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2026.1004>
- Elsaesser, T. (1972). Tales of sound and fury: Observations on the family melodrama. *Monogram*, 4, 2–15.
- Engels, F. (2010). *The origin of the family, private property and the state*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1884)
- Erdem, S. (2026). Partition as historical novum: Cognitive estrangement in Ritwik Ghatak's Partition Trilogy. *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, 14(2), 658–686. <https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2026.955>
- Fraser, N. (2016). Contradictions of capital and care. *New Left Review*, 100, 99–117. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii100/articles/nancy-fraser-contradictions-of-capital-and-care>
- Ghatak, R. (Director). (1960). *Meghe Dhaka Tara* [Film]. Chitrakalpa.
- Ghatak, R. (Director). (1961). *Komal Gandhar* [Film]. Chitrakalpa.
- Ghatak, R. (Director). (1965). *Subarnarekha* [Film]. Bijoyini Films.
- Ghatak, R. (2000). *Rows and rows of fences: Ritwik Ghatak on cinema*. Seagull Books.

- Gledhill, C. (1987). The melodramatic field: An investigation. In C. Gledhill (Ed.), *Home is where the heart is: Studies in melodrama and the woman's film* (pp. 5–43). British Film Institute.
- Hood, J. W. (2000). *The essential mystery: The major filmmakers of Indian art cinema*. Orient Longman.
- Jameson, F. (1979). Reification and utopia in mass culture. *Social Text*, 1, 130–148.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/466409>
- Kolker, R. (2016). *Film, form, and culture* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Mandal, S. (2008). Constructing post-Partition Bengali cultural identity through films. In A. G. Roy & N. Bhatia (Eds.), *Partitioned lives: Narratives of home, displacement, and resettlement* (pp. 65–81). Pearson.
- McConachie, B. A., & Gerould, D. (1994). Marxism, melodrama, and theatre historiography. *TDR: The Drama Review*, 38(1), 31–34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1146350>
- Mehta, R. B., & Mookerjee-Leonard, D. (2015). Introduction. In R. B. Mehta & D. Mookerjee-Leonard (Eds.), *The Indian Partition in literature and films: History, politics, and aesthetics* (pp. 1–7). Routledge.
- Menon, J. (2012). *The performance of nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the memory of Partition*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511686900>
- Mukherjee, V. (2016). Reading the screen: The agony of Partition and politics of patriarchy in Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha*. *The Criterion*, 7(4), 138–145.
- Mukherjee, V. (2017). The muted voice of a refugee woman: Looking at Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* through the feminist lens. *The Criterion*, 8(2), 39–48.
- Natarajan, P. (2018). Female subjectivity, patriarchy and melodrama in Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 9(1), 183–185.
<https://doi.org/10.5958/2321-5828.2018.00032.3>
- O'Donnell, E. (2004). “Woman” and “homeland” in Ritwik Ghatak's films: Constructing post-Independence Bengali cultural identity. *Jump Cut*, 47.
<https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc47.2005/ghatak/text.html>

- Rajadhyaksha, A., & Gangar, A. (Eds.). (1987). *Ritwik Ghatak: Arguments/stories*. Screen Unit, Research Centre for Cinema Studies.
- Raychaudhuri, A. (2009). Resisting the resistible: Re-writing myths of Partition in the works of Ritwik Ghatak. *Social Semiotics*, 19(4), 469–481.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330903361158>
- Sarkar, B. (2009). *Mourning the nation: Indian cinema in the wake of Partition*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392217>
- Traverso, E. (2016). *Left-wing melancholia: Marxism, history, and memory*. Columbia University Press.
- Vahali, D. O. (2018). Partition and the betrayal of India's independence. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 76, 91–101.
- Vahali, D. O. (2020). *Ritwik Ghatak and the cinema of praxis: Culture, aesthetics and vision*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1197-4>
- Williams, L. (1998). Melodrama revised. In N. Browne (Ed.), *Refiguring American film genres: History and theory* (pp. 42–88). University of California Press.