



Intersecting Women's Identities, Injustice, and Resistance to Power Structures in Ritwik Ghatak's Partition Trilogy

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Abstract: This article examines the three women protagonists of Ritwik Ghatak's Partition Trilogy through intersectionality and Collins and Bilge's four domains of power. Comparative close readings of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961), and *Subarnarekha* (1965) consider how displacement interacts with gender, class, caste, and familial authority. Drawing on Fricker's epistemic injustice and Medina's epistemic resistance, the analysis distinguishes struggles for credibility and self-definition from suffering alone. Attention to framing, sound, performance, and theatricality demonstrates that Neeta, Anusuya, and Sita encounter markedly different possibilities for resistance. Their stories expose how structural inequalities operate within everyday relationships after Partition.

Keywords: Ritwik Ghatak; Partition Trilogy; intersectionality; domains of power; epistemic injustice; epistemic resistance; Partition of Bengal; Bengali cinema



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Introduction

Ritwik Kumar Ghatak (1925–1976) developed a distinctive cinematic language for confronting displacement, memory, and inequality in post-independence Bengal (Raychaudhuri, 2009). Having experienced the upheaval of Partition, he repeatedly returned to its consequences for everyday life. His association with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) also informed his conviction that performance and cinema could make social contradictions visible (O'Donnell, 2010). In *Rows and Rows of Fences*, Ghatak describes an artistic imperative that connects his personal history to the public life of a divided Bengal:

What I have found most urgent is to present to the public eye the crumbling appearance of a divided Bengal to awaken the Bengalis to an awareness of their state and a concern for their past and the future. (Ghatak, 2000, p. 49)

Critics have traced the persistence of Partition across Ghatak's feature films, whether through explicit refugee narratives or through less direct images of estrangement and broken social ties (Raychaudhuri, 2009). Satyajit Ray similarly emphasized the consistency of this concern in his foreword to Ghatak's *Cinema and I*:

Thematically, Ritwik's lifelong obsession was with the tragedy of partition. He himself hailed from what was once East Bengal, where he had deep roots. It is rarely that a director dwells so singlemindedly on the same theme. It only serves to underline the depth of his feeling for the subject. (Ray, 1987, p. 12)

Ghatak's aesthetic does not fit neatly within the conventions of social realism. He draws on Bengali folk performance, Rabindra Sangeet, mythological narratives, and theatrical devices

associated with Brecht to place intense feeling alongside critical reflection (Ghatak, 2000; O'Donnell, 2010; Biswas, 2021). His films do not simply distance spectators from suffering: they frequently produce emotional identification and then interrupt it through conspicuous changes in sound, framing, or performance. This tension between melodrama and estrangement is central to how the trilogy communicates the historical experience of Partition.

Existing scholarship has examined Partition and the rewriting of myth (Raychaudhuri, 2009), IPTA theatricality (O'Donnell, 2010), the limits of representation in *Subarnarekha* (Biswas, 2021), and the cinematic reorganization of urban space and looking (Chowdhury, 2015; Barman, 2025). These accounts provide important foundations but leave room for a sustained comparative analysis of how power operates differently upon the trilogy's three women protagonists. This article addresses that question through Neeta in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ghatak, 1960), Anusuya in *Komal Gandhar* (Ghatak, 1961), and Sita in *Subarnarekha* (Ghatak, 1965). It examines not only the overlapping social relations that shape their choices but also the ways Ghatak's camera, editing, lighting, staging, and soundtrack make their unequal positions perceptible. It treats intersectionality as an account of interacting power relations rather than simply an inventory of character identities. The films cannot stand in for all refugee women's experiences; instead, their contrasting narratives enable a close reading of specific gendered responses to displacement and the social order that follows it.

A particular challenge for such a reading is the difference between invoking intersectionality and demonstrating it. A character's gender, for example, does not by itself explain why others can exercise power over her. The analysis instead connects a recognizable decision or confrontation to the social relations that make it possible: who controls income, whose work is treated as obligatory, which relationships are recognized, and how a woman's account of events is received. This emphasis helps distinguish the consequences of refugee displacement from older hierarchies that survive within the new national order. It also allows Ghatak's formal choices to do analytical work. A low-angle shot or

an obstructed frame should not be read as a fixed code for domination in isolation; it becomes significant in relation to dialogue, performance, sound, and the position of the characters within a particular sequence. The comparison aims to show how these formal relationships produce different experiences of power rather than assuming that every visually subordinated character is deprived of agency in the same way.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality and Power Dynamics

Intersectionality challenges approaches that isolate gender from the other relations through which inequality is organized. Early Black feminist interventions by hooks (1981) and Davis (1983) are important precedents, while Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) work specifies how single-axis frameworks obscure forms of discrimination produced at the intersection of social locations and institutional practices. *Intersectionality* does not imply that every character experiences every axis of disadvantage equally. Rather, it asks how gender, class, caste, migration, and other historically situated positions interact with institutions, resources, and social expectations. Cho et al. (2013) likewise emphasize intersectionality as a field concerned with power, not merely the coexistence of identities. This distinction matters to the trilogy: Neeta's economic dependence, Anusuya's involvement in cultural activism, and Sita's exposure to caste and familial hierarchies cannot be analyzed as interchangeable examples of women's oppression.

Collins's (2000) account of the matrix of domination connects intersecting inequalities to interlocking arrangements of power. Collins and Bilge (2020) distinguish four analytically related domains: the structural domain, which organizes institutions and access to resources; the disciplinary domain, through which conduct is administered and regulated; the cultural domain, which circulates representations and norms; and the interpersonal domain, in which power is negotiated in everyday relations. Their value for film analysis lies in following how these domains operate together rather than

assigning a scene to one domain exclusively. A further distinction concerns injustice to a person as a knower. Fricker (2007) identifies testimonial injustice, in which prejudice produces an unwarranted credibility deficit, and hermeneutical injustice, in which unequal participation in shared interpretive resources makes an experience harder to articulate or understand. Neither category is synonymous with every form of subordination. Medina (2013, 2017) develops this discussion by examining resistant epistemic practices and the social conditions under which marginalized people challenge dominant interpretations. Here, the terms are used most precisely when a protagonist's account is discredited, excluded, or actively reasserted, rather than as general labels for her suffering.

A historically situated application of intersectionality must also take account of the transnational processes that shape apparently local hierarchies. Patil (2013) cautions against treating nation-states as self-contained settings for gender relations, an especially productive warning for films shaped by the geopolitical rupture of 1947. In Bengal, migration and the newly enforced border interact with preexisting differences of caste, class, gender, and community. The trilogy shows that a shared history of displacement does not erase differences in social power: the family's expectations of Neeta, the theater movement's treatment of Anusuya, and the discrimination surrounding Sita and Abhiram operate through distinct institutional and cultural arrangements. The analysis therefore attends to these differences without attributing all forms of injustice to Partition alone.

Power is exercised not only through formal institutions but also through expectations that appear ordinary or affectionate. Allen's (1998) discussion of power-over is useful for identifying relations in which one person or group restricts another's options; Sutherland and Feltey (2017) demonstrate the value of intersectional approaches to women's representation in film. Yet domination is not the entirety of the trilogy's gender politics. The analysis also asks whether the women can challenge the terms through which others define them and whether the films' formal strategies allow spectators to recognize those efforts.

Methodologically, the article employs qualitative comparative textual analysis, combining close reading of narrative events with attention to *mise-en-scène*, camera position, framing, performance, sound, and editing. Scenes have been selected because they foreground unequal access to resources, the regulation of conduct, culturally sanctioned gender roles, or interpersonal attempts to control and contest women's decisions. The discussion is organized around Collins and Bilge's (2020) four domains of power, although these inevitably overlap. Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) framework explains the interaction of social positions, while Fricker (2007) and Medina (2013) are invoked where questions of credibility, intelligibility, and resistance specifically arise. References to Brechtian estrangement identify moments of formal interruption that encourage critical reflection; they do not assume that every expressive close-up or emotional scene produces an alienation effect. These are interpretations of the films' form and narrative, not claims about measured audience responses.

The four domains provide a sequence of questions for the close readings rather than a rigid classification scheme. Under structural power, the analysis identifies historically specific distributions of land, employment, and mobility. Under disciplinary power, it examines how families and cultural institutions monitor conduct, allocate obligations, or enforce reputational boundaries. The cultural domain directs attention to songs, stories, mythological references, and socially approved models of femininity. Finally, the interpersonal domain asks how these larger arrangements acquire force in relationships among siblings, lovers, colleagues, and dependents. Because a single scene may engage several domains, the section headings name the dominant analytical emphasis, not mutually exclusive categories. This approach also prevents the vocabulary of epistemic injustice from becoming an all-purpose moral judgment. A character may be exploited economically without necessarily being denied credibility; the two injuries often coincide, but they must be argued for separately. The distinction becomes especially important when assessing whether a particular response constitutes resistance to an imposed interpretation or an act carried out under conditions of desperation.

Structural Domain

Across the Partition Trilogy, structural power is visible in the distribution of land, income, occupation, security, and movement following the division of Bengal. Partition is not itself one of Collins and Bilge's (2020) four domains; rather, it is a historical rupture that reorganizes institutions and resources within the structural domain. Migration from East to West Bengal exposes households to insecure shelter, diminished livelihoods, and the unequal allocation of responsibilities. Ghatak's women encounter this disruption from different positions: Neeta becomes the economic mainstay of a refugee family; Anusuya seeks cultural and emotional belonging through theater; and Sita's life is shaped by displacement together with caste hierarchy and her brother's authority. A shared historical predicament, then, does not produce a uniform female experience. The films disclose the gendered consequences of structural change through particular social relations and cinematic situations.

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Neeta's responsibility for her family's survival makes the economic consequences of Partition tangible. The marketplace sequence connects material scarcity to the pressure exerted on her as the household's principal earner. Ghatak frames the shopkeeper, Banshi-da, in a sustained medium close-up and shifts to an over-the-shoulder composition that includes Neeta, placing his demand for payment alongside her discomfort. The later view of her worn clothing and damaged sandal gives everyday deprivation a physical form. As Neeta looks down at the broken sandal, a seemingly minor incident becomes a recurring measure of how little space remains for her own needs. The framing does not simply illustrate poverty: it links a visible object to the expectation that she must keep moving and working. Her new economic role does not automatically bring authority or freedom. The family continues to rely on gendered ideals of dutiful self-denial even while depending on her income.

The sandal also offers a way of connecting this early episode to the film's concluding image. At first, the broken object belongs to Neeta's immediate experience: it interrupts her movement, reminds her of scarcity, and demands another small act of self-repair before she continues. At the end, a similar

interruption affects another woman in the colony. Read together, these images complicate any interpretation of Neeta's suffering as a uniquely private tragedy. The repetition suggests a wider pattern in which women continue to absorb the material effects of scarcity while the social organization around them remains unchanged. The film does not reveal whether the second woman shares Neeta's history, and that uncertainty is important. The visual echo allows a collective question to emerge without claiming that the women's lives are identical. Ghatak thus moves from a specific hardship to a recognizable social relation through an ordinary object, illustrating how formal repetition can connect personal and historical experience.

Neeta's wage-earning position thus complicates, rather than cancels, patriarchal authority. Her father's comparison between earlier practices of marrying young women to much older men and the family's present dependence on a daughter's earnings draws attention to changing forms of exploitation. In the scene, the relatively restrained camera position and the contrast between light and shadow make the father's recognition of the problem visible without turning that recognition into an effective intervention. Neeta hears the criticism but remains burdened by the conditions it identifies. This gap between knowing about injustice and acting against it is crucial. The sequence creates space for critical reflection on the family's treatment of Neeta, although its emotional force should not be collapsed into an automatic or total Brechtian estrangement effect.

Ghatak's relationship with the IPTA tradition is especially visible in *Komal Gandhar*, which depicts the struggles and conflicts of two radical theater groups, Dakshinapath and Niriksha, against the backdrop of post-Partition refugee life in Calcutta. The tension between their shared commitments and their rivalry is announced in the opening prologue: "Young, theater-crazy people; they come together from all places. They form a troupe. Their family grows up with tenderness, affection, jealousy, and hatred. They don't have a real family of their own. Here is a chapter in their history" (O'Donnell, 2010, p. 263). Ghatak introduces the historical violence of Partition through a play that communicates the grief of uprooted people. An anguished older man emerges from darkness in close-

up to ask the audience, “Why should I leave this lovely country, my river Padma?” The delay before he appears and the darkness surrounding his face convey the difficulty of narrating displacement without requiring the image to stand for the whole of Partition. The camera then moves between the performed scene and a wider view of the stage under flat theatrical lighting. Close-ups register the speaker’s anguish; wider compositions gather the displaced figures within the crowded stage space. The play-within-the-film juxtaposes theatrical expression with cinematic observation. Its address reaches audiences inside the story and spectators watching the film. The camera moves from the performance to its spectators and then to Dakshinapath members criticizing what they have watched. The three perspectives—performance, emotional reception, and critical judgment—complicate any singular response to the refugee story. The viewer is thus invited to consider not only what the performance depicts but also how it is interpreted and contested by competing audiences. The layering resembles a Brechtian strategy of estrangement: sympathy for the displaced figures coexists with scrutiny of rivalry and disagreement among people who share a political and cultural purpose. The scene links the memory of Partition to the social relations through which that memory is performed and debated.

The railway-track sequence in *Komal Gandhar* brings the structural consequences of Partition into a concentrated visual form. Framed from behind, Bhriku and Anusuya stand at the edge of a railway line that no longer enables the journey it once promised. The interrupted track and the river beyond it turn a border imposed by political history into a visible absence in their everyday geography. Their shared position in the frame does not eliminate differences between them; rather, it reveals the overlap between public displacement and intimate memory. Anusuya’s experience of loss complicates the notion that participation in a new nation necessarily offers a stable sense of belonging. Ghatak makes the end of a route stand for the breakdown of relationships between people, places, and remembered lives, without reducing either character to a merely national symbol.

Subarnarekha opens with a dated account of refugees attempting to establish settlements around Calcutta on January 26, 1948. Its juxtaposition of a national flag, school-building aspirations, and coercive attempts to evict people questions the promises of independence for those who have lost their homes. As the camera moves across the crowd, the film connects the collective language of nation-building to insecurity on the ground. The separation of the Bagdi woman from her child is especially important: her lower-caste position and refugee vulnerability intersect with gendered exposure to violence. This episode shows why an intersectional reading must account for caste as well as the upheavals associated with Partition. The same public occasion can represent hope for a national community and acute danger for those least protected by its social institutions. The analysis of the scene therefore moves beyond the idea of displacement as a uniform experience shared equally by all refugees.

The Bagdi woman's situation demonstrates why it would be inadequate to discuss the protagonists simply as displaced women whose experiences are interchangeable. Her vulnerable position within the community is marked by caste and material insecurity, while the coercion surrounding the attempted eviction reveals how little protection the national community offers its least powerful members. The encounter is also narrated through the loss of contact between mother and child, making the structural violence immediately legible in an intimate relationship. This movement from collective spectacle to individual anguish does not turn her solely into an emblem of motherhood. It asks the spectator to see the unequal human costs of the scene's public claims about freedom and belonging. The episode becomes a point of comparison with the treatment of Sita, for whom caste is again consequential in the policing of a relationship. In both cases the oppression associated with caste works together with gender and poverty, rather than simply adding another independent injury to an otherwise common refugee experience.

Disciplinary Domain

The disciplinary domain concerns the everyday practices through which behavior is supervised, judged, and brought into conformity with institutional or familial expectations (Collins & Bilge, 2020). In the trilogy, such regulation is visible in domestic monitoring, the policing of reputation, the allocation of household obligations, and the control of women's choices. Discipline frequently operates through appeals to protection and responsibility rather than through overt physical force. Women may also participate in sustaining restrictive expectations. The aim is not to treat every disagreement as disciplinary domination but to identify patterns that narrow the protagonists' opportunities to exercise meaningful agency.

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the family's dependence on Neeta does not prevent her privacy and choices from being regulated. Shankar's seizure of Sanat's letter, for example, turns a private exchange into an occasion for a brother's intervention. The vertical distribution of the figures within the frame reinforces an imbalance between his presumed entitlement to intrude and her limited control over her correspondence. The mother's attempts to bring Geeta and Sanat together more directly link domestic manipulation to financial dependency: retaining Neeta as a wage earner helps sustain the household. The arrangement of foreground and background positions Neeta at a remove while Geeta and Sanat occupy the focus of the encounter. The sound of boiling water intensifies the mother's watchful presence, although it cannot, by itself, establish her inner intention. These formal details show how the family economy is maintained through restrictions on Neeta's autonomy as well as through her unpaid work.

Komal Gandhar exposes a contradiction within organizations committed to collective cultural work. The rival theater groups, Dakshinapath and Niriksha, aspire to progressive public expression yet reproduce forms of judgment that constrain Anusuya's role. Bhrigu's authority as director can place her creative decisions under scrutiny, while hostile gossip within the troupe subjects her reputation to communal inspection. In the rehearsal sequence, shifts in camera angle and the distribution of speech

underline the tension between the director's demands and Anusuya's own responses. Her rebuke to Bhrigu asserts an independent judgment rather than passive acceptance. More pointedly, when Shibnath questions her relationship with Bhrigu before other members, the issue is not only interpersonal humiliation: an authoritative male accusation threatens to override her account of her own conduct. The close framing and her partially obscured position dramatize the imbalance in who can speak credibly within the group. Shanta's hostility further complicates the picture by showing that women can reproduce disciplinary judgments. Such scenes make epistemic injustice a plausible, specific question where Anusuya's credibility is at stake, rather than a synonym for every affront she experiences (Fricker, 2007).

This distinction between public humiliation and epistemic wrong sharpens the reading of Anusuya. Shibnath's accusations are objectionable because they impose a moral interpretation of her relationship with Bhrigu before an audience able to affect her status in the troupe. They become an issue of testimonial injustice if her account is accorded less credibility because she is a woman whose conduct is being judged by asymmetrical standards. The film provides grounds for asking that question in the uneven distribution of speech and authority within the meeting. Its *mise-en-scène* locates her under scrutiny while the accuser occupies a position from which he can define the terms of debate. Her silence at one moment, however, is not sufficient evidence that she lacks concepts through which to understand her experience. That would be the stronger and different claim required for hermeneutical injustice. Ghatak's treatment of the meeting therefore suggests an institutional problem of credibility and voice without collapsing all dimensions of the confrontation into a single theoretical label (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2017).

In *Subarnarekha*, Ishwar's authority over his younger sister Sita becomes a sustained form of familial regulation. He supervises her upbringing, influences her educational opportunities, and ultimately attempts to decide whom she may marry. His power is intensified by the household's dependence on his judgment and by prejudice against Abhiram's caste background. The contrast

between Sita's music lessons and Abhiram's studies, staged against the bright river landscape, draws attention to different expectations for the young people's futures. Such spatial arrangements suggest unequal access to self-determination, though a scene alone cannot establish that Sita has been wholly denied formal schooling. It is the accumulating pattern of control—rather than musical training itself—that makes her prospects increasingly dependent on Ishwar's approval.

The discovery of Abhiram's gift to Sita makes the disciplinary character of Ishwar's protection unmistakable. Close framing, low-key lighting, and sharp contrasts of light and shadow register his anger as he confronts her about the relationship. Although Sita occupies much of the frame, her face is withheld while Ishwar's expression remains visible, suggesting an imbalance in whose account carries authority. When she insists on the relationship, his declaration that he would rather see her dead than married to Abhiram reveals the violence embedded in his claim to safeguard her future. Her reply is a moment of verbal opposition, but its significance lies also in how severely the family's available choices have been restricted.

Caste must remain part of this argument rather than disappearing behind an exclusively familial vocabulary. Abhiram's position is shaped by the history of his mother, a Bagdi woman, and by the stigma attached to that identity. Ishwar's opposition to the relationship therefore draws upon social distinctions that exist beyond the household, even as he enforces them through the authority of an elder brother. Sita's choice threatens a hierarchy whose legitimacy he has come to assume. The scene's intensity derives partly from this collision between personal attachment and socially organized exclusion. His words define the relationship as intolerable before he has considered Sita's understanding of it. Her refusal to submit is important, but it does not place her beyond the material risks of rejecting his protection. The film exposes a central contradiction of patriarchal dependency: authority claims to preserve a woman's future while denying her the capacity to determine what that future might be.

Cultural Domain

The cultural domain encompasses the representations and value systems that make unequal social relations appear acceptable or natural (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Across the trilogy, mythology, songs, ideals of feminine beauty, and narratives of dutiful sacrifice mediate the female characters' positions. References to Durga or Uma, Shakuntala, and the Sita of the Ramayana do not carry a single fixed meaning: they can elevate a woman, impose an expectation, or expose the cost of being made exemplary. Rabindra Sangeet and Bengali folk traditions likewise express memory and belonging while interacting with the pressure to perform culturally sanctioned roles. The films' use of these materials invites an analysis of how cultural meaning can reproduce domination and also make its contradictions perceptible.

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the contrast between Neeta and Geeta illuminates the social expectations attached to women's appearance and marriageability. Differences in lighting, gesture, costume, and framing encourage the spectator to notice how the sisters are seen and valued within the household. Yet it would be too simple to infer that Neeta's shadowed face establishes her as objectively less beautiful. The contrast is more revealing as an image of selective attention: Neeta's exhausting responsibilities become increasingly invisible while Geeta is available to be idealized by Sanat. During the wedding sequence, Rabindra Sangeet evokes the gap between public celebration and Neeta's private loss. The camera's concentration on Neeta's face and the persistence of her sobbing refuse an uncomplicated festive reading of the occasion. Emotional identification remains powerful, while the juxtaposition of song and suffering also calls into question the family's assumption that her sacrifices are inexhaustible.

The wedding scene makes the distribution of recognition especially complex. Neeta has contributed the income and labor that help sustain the celebrations, but she cannot participate in them without experiencing the loss of her own projected life with Sanat. Song provides an emotional continuity between the communal occasion and her isolation. Where wedding music might ordinarily

affirm a transition into a socially recognized future, Ghatak allows it to coexist with a face and voice registering exclusion. The contrast is not a straightforward opposition between joyful Geeta and sorrowful Neeta; it is a question about why one sister's prospects are secured through a family arrangement that has rendered the other sister indispensable but disposable. This is also why a purely visual explanation based on beauty standards would be insufficient. The women's differing positions depend on the family's economic arrangements, the choices of the men around them, and the cultural expectations that make Neeta's continued sacrifice appear natural. The sound-image relation gives those unequal arrangements an affective form.

The song associated with Uma adds another layer to this cultural pattern. Invoking a maternal figure of return and consolation, it resonates with Neeta's need for care and the expectations that she will provide care to others. Ghatak's close framing of her face against the window bars turns a domestic setting into an image of separation and confinement. The association with divine motherhood is therefore double-edged: it gives emotional dignity to Neeta's suffering while risking the idealization that helps sustain her exploitation. The film's representation of tuberculosis must also be distinguished from a medical claim that overwork directly caused the disease. Her work, exhaustion, concealment of symptoms, and delayed care form a compelling narrative sequence, not a diagnosis of etiology. As Gupta (2020) argues, the disease carries a symbolic burden within the film's account of loss; its representational meaning should not be confused with medical causation. Nor is bodily illness alone an instance of epistemic injustice. That concept becomes pertinent when Neeta's account of her needs is discounted or excluded (Fricker, 2007).

Komal Gandhar uses the rehearsal of Kalidasa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* to bring a familiar cultural narrative into contact with recent displacement. Shakuntala's departure from the forest hermitage gives Anusuya a vocabulary for recalling the separation from her own home. Bhriгу directs the scene by encouraging her to draw on memory rather than to reproduce an inherited image of grief mechanically.

The camera alternates between the director and performer, allowing theatrical instruction and remembered experience to occupy the same cinematic space. When Bhriku likens people and places around Anusuya to the plants and animals associated with Shakuntala's world, mythological motifs become resources for understanding a transformed present. The sequence also exposes a tension: the director guides the actress's performance, but the emotional knowledge required to animate it belongs to Anusuya. This layered encounter among film, theater, myth, and memory complicates the boundary between cultural authority and an individual woman's interpretation of loss (O'Donnell, 2010).

In *Subarnarekha*, cultural power operates through both the *Bahurupi* performer's appearance and the repeated invocation of the Sita of the Ramayana. The performer's unsettling presence interrupts the young Sita's song and momentarily changes a familiar landscape into a site of fear. Ghatak's transition between song, the performer's costume, and Sita's reaction shows how performance can disturb rather than reassure. Later, the account of the mythological Sita's return to the earth introduces a narrative of suffering whose implications hover over the heroine's future. The film does not simply claim that the modern Sita must repeat a predetermined mythic fate. Instead, the allusion invites scrutiny of a culture in which women are named through revered narratives while denied control over decisions affecting their lives. The tension between mythic elevation and everyday vulnerability links the cultural domain to the familial regulation examined earlier.

Interpersonal Domain

The interpersonal domain concerns power as it is experienced and contested within day-to-day relationships (Collins & Bilge, 2020). The trilogy's most intimate relations are also sites where economic need, reputation, caste, and gender become personally consequential. Neeta's family depends on her while denying her a life beyond service; Anusuya negotiates competing claims on her future within a theater community; and Sita confronts her brother's increasingly destructive control. These relations are neither wholly separable from the other three domains nor reducible to simple

conflicts between good and bad individuals. They also make visible different kinds and limits of resistance. Medina's (2013) account is particularly relevant where a woman actively challenges the assumptions through which others interpret her desires and experiences.

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the growing distance between Neeta and Sanat gives interpersonal form to the erosion of her private hopes. Earlier scenes position them in relative proximity; later arrangements place her apart as he gravitates toward Geeta. Their marriage intensifies Neeta's isolation, but the film does not treat her merely as a silent victim. When Sanat seeks an explanation or reconciliation, Neeta's refusal to restore their former intimacy marks a limit she can still draw against his claims upon her. This is a form of interpersonal refusal; it can be read as epistemic resistance insofar as she rejects the account of her life that others expect her to accept (Medina, 2013). The sanatorium climax gives the stakes of that refusal their starkest expression. Neeta's repeated demand to live reverberates across the mountainous setting, carrying her personal desire beyond the narrow domestic world in which it was denied. The cry is not evidence of political liberation or of recovery. It is an insistence on the value of a life that others treated as expendable, and its force remains inseparable from the film's refusal to offer a consoling resolution.

The difference between an interpersonal refusal and a structural transformation is especially clear in Neeta's story. Rejecting Sanat's attempt at reconciliation does not undo her family's economic dependence or give her the resources required to live independently. Similarly, the declaration at the sanatorium names a desire rather than an achieved liberation. Its force arises partly from the delay: only after her illness has deprived her of the everyday life she sustained for others does she fully articulate what she wants for herself. The landscape and reverberation of her voice expand the moment beyond the confined spaces of home, but visual openness cannot reverse the accumulated consequences of exploitation. Read in this way, her cry makes a claim to be heard that the family had repeatedly failed to recognize. It is not merely an image of female sacrifice, nor is it a program for collective

action. It exposes the gap between the recognition of injustice and the conditions in which recognition could become a different social practice.

In *Komal Gandhar*, Anusuya negotiates the competing claims of Samar, her fiancé abroad, and Bhriгу, with whom she shares the work of theater. Samar's presence is largely mediated through correspondence, allowing his imagined future with Anusuya to operate in the film without the ordinary reciprocity of face-to-face interaction. This absence does not automatically make him controlling; what matters is how the competing futures offered by the men might limit or enable Anusuya's own choice. Her growing intimacy with Bhriгу is inseparable from collaborative artistic practice, but the film also exposes his tendency to exercise directorial authority over her. At the conclusion, the focus on their joined hands registers a possible personal and theatrical partnership. It should not be assumed that the image guarantees permanent equality or that abandoning Samar amounts simply to a sacrifice of material security. A more persuasive reading locates her resistance in her attempt to articulate and pursue a future she has chosen, however uncertain that future remains.

In *Subarnarekha*, disciplinary authority and intimate dependency converge most devastatingly in Ishwar's relationship with Sita. His refusal to accept her union with Abhiram helps set in motion the estrangement that follows. After Abhiram's death, Sita is left in acute insecurity, and the brothel sequence brings her circumstances into a horrifying encounter with her brother. Low-key lighting, restricted framing, and the alternation between Sita's face and Ishwar's expression communicate the shock of their recognition. The sequence demands that spectators confront the consequences of a form of protection exercised as coercion. Sita then dies by suicide. To describe her death confidently as an empowering act of resistance would risk romanticizing an event shaped by desperation and drastically curtailed possibilities. The film instead stages the catastrophic limit of agency under intersecting pressures of gender, caste, poverty, and familial authority. Her experience exposes the failure of others to acknowledge her perspective; it does not, by that fact alone, constitute the specific hermeneutical

injustice theorized by Fricker (2007). Any account of resistance here must remain attentive to that distinction and to the violence of the outcome.

The ending also makes it necessary to distinguish the film's moral force from an overly simple theory of agency. Suicide should not be treated as evidence that Sita has finally gained control over her circumstances, especially when the narrative has made the successive removal of viable alternatives so central. Nor does the tragedy demonstrate that she lacks the concepts needed to understand what has happened to her. She is repeatedly shown making choices and expressing attachments that others refuse to acknowledge. The problem is that those who wield authority deny the legitimacy of her account and constrain what she can do with it. Ishwar's recognition comes only when the consequences of his decisions can no longer be reversed. By withholding an affirmative resolution, Ghatak directs scrutiny toward the structures and interpersonal judgments that produced the situation. This interpretation makes room for the specificity of epistemic harms while preserving the ethical gravity of Sita's death and the film's indictment of a social order that offered her no safe or sustainable route forward.

Conclusion

Reading Ritwik Ghatak's Partition Trilogy through intersectionality and the four domains of power reveals how the aftermath of Partition takes distinct forms in women's lives. Neeta, Anusuya, and Sita share a historical world marked by displacement, but their possibilities differ according to family position, access to income and cultural work, and the gendered and caste-based judgments of those around them. Structural changes shape the conditions in which they live; disciplinary practices regulate their choices; cultural narratives authorize or question expectations of femininity; and interpersonal relationships translate these pressures into everyday encounters. These domains are analytically distinguishable but never isolated in the films.

Ghatak's cinematic form is crucial to this argument. Shifts in framing, lighting, depth, performance, and the relation of sound to image do more than express emotion. They expose the

difference between the women's experiences and the roles imposed on them. Theatricality in *Komal Gandhar* can invite reflection while retaining the affective force of remembered loss; domestic compositions in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* render visible Neeta's position as indispensable worker and marginal family member; and the tragic encounters of *Subarnarekha* reveal the violence concealed within protective authority. These are formal interpretations of specific scenes, not universal claims about spectators' responses.

The films also caution against treating resistance as a single outcome. Neeta's refusal of Sanat and her demand to live assert the authority of her experience without overcoming the structures that have constrained it. Anusuya claims a voice within a cultural institution whose professed egalitarianism is incomplete. Sita's fate, by contrast, marks the extreme narrowing of meaningful choices and should not be celebrated as emancipation. Fricker's concepts clarify the moments at which the women's credibility or interpretive standing is denied, while Medina's work draws attention to their attempts to contest dominant accounts of their lives. The trilogy's significance lies not in offering identical arcs of female liberation but in confronting the uneven and sometimes devastating conditions under which such liberation is imagined. This comparative reading extends scholarship on Ghatak by showing that Partition's gendered aftermath is inseparable from the interaction of historical structures, intimate relations, and cinematic form.

Editor's note: Additional scholarship

In addition to the scholarship already discussed, several essays in this issue of CINEJ address the same trilogy and its women protagonists: Emmanuel and Rego (2026) read the three films through a postcolonial and matrixial gaze; Arslan (2026) and Akmeşe and Erçetingöz (2026) discuss gendered labor, sound, and sacrifice in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*; and Trivedi (2026) examines caste and kinship in *Subarnarekha*. Banerjee (2023), in CINEJ, questions how *bhadralok* cultural memory can marginalize differences of caste and gender in Ghatak's films, and O'Donnell (2004) examines how his films construct woman and homeland. Both bear on

this article's intersectional reading. These sources have been included where directly relevant; the interpretive claims remain those of the authors.

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