



Partition as Historical Novum: Cognitive Estrangement in Ritwik Ghatak's Partition Trilogy

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Abstract

This article rereads Ritwik Ghatak's Partition Trilogy—*Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar*, and *Subarnarekha*—through Darko Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement. It does not claim that Ghatak is a science fiction filmmaker; rather, it argues that Partition functions in his cinema as a historical novum: a rupture that transforms home, landscape, kinship, and national belonging into unfamiliar perceptual fields. Through close readings of sound, interrupted railway spaces, mythological interruptions, and female suffering, the article shows how Ghatak's melodrama converts post-Partition trauma into an estranged mode of historical perception. This framework connects melodrama, postcolonial displacement, and science fiction theory while preserving the Bengali specificity of Ghatak's films.

Keywords: Ritwik Ghatak; Partition Trilogy; cognitive estrangement; historical novum; melodrama; postcolonial displacement; unhomeliness; sound design; Bengali cinema; Darko Suvin; science fiction theory



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Serhat Erdem

Introduction

Ritwik Kumar Ghatak (1925–1976) remains one of the most original and politically urgent figures in Indian parallel cinema. The 1947 Partition of South Asia divided Bengal and produced mass migration, refugee settlements, broken families, and enduring cultural trauma. Ghatak's own displacement from East Bengal to India shaped his cinema so deeply that exile, loss, and fractured belonging became not only recurring themes but also organizing principles of his film form. His reflections on cinema repeatedly return to the wound of Bengal's division, described as an independence that was “a fake and a sham” (Ghatak, as cited in O'Donnell, 2004). Barman (2022) similarly treats *Meghe Dhaka Tara* as a microhistory of post-Partition Bengal, showing how Ghatak's family dramas register the social history of refugee life. His Partition Trilogy—*Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ghatak, 1960), *Komal Gandhar* (Ghatak, 1961), and *Subarnarekha* (Ghatak, 1965; completed in 1962)—returns repeatedly to the problem of how a familiar homeland becomes inaccessible, how the family becomes a site of exploitation and mourning, and how historical rupture enters the body, voice, and memory of displaced subjects. Ghatak's cinema is therefore not simply a representation of refugee suffering; it is a sustained

protest against the historical conditions that produced that suffering and against the national narratives that often marginalized it (O'Donnell, 2004; Caesar, 2017, p. 39).

Existing scholarship has most often approached Ghatak through the frameworks of melodrama, myth, postcolonial identity, and Partition memory. Such approaches are indispensable. Natarajan (2018) emphasizes the radical potential of melodrama in Ghatak's cinema, arguing that its emotional intensity exposes the contradictions of dominant culture and makes visible the lives of people torn from their homeland. O'Donnell (2004) and Raychaudhuri (2009) show that the mother figure, the female protagonist, and the image of home often become allegorical figures for the nation, while also revealing the gendered violence embedded in patriarchal and postcolonial structures. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, for example, Neeta's body carries both familial exploitation and the pain of a fragmented homeland. These readings clarify why Ghatak's melodrama cannot be dismissed as excessive sentiment: its excess is a means of historical and political articulation.

This article builds on these readings while shifting the emphasis from representation to perception. It does not classify Ghatak's Partition films as science fiction. Rather, it draws selectively on science fiction theory to explain how his cinema renders historical reality perceptually strange. Darko Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement is useful here not

because Ghatak constructs futuristic or technological worlds, but because his films make the familiar world of home, family, landscape, and national belonging appear radically unfamiliar after Partition (Suvin, 1979). In this deliberately analogical sense, Partition may be read as a historical novum: not the fictional innovation specified by Suvin's genre theory, but a rupture that reorganizes the conditions of perception, memory, and identity. Ghatak's cinema repeatedly stages this rupture through distorted sound, interrupted railway spaces, mythological intrusions, fractured domestic interiors, and melodramatic excess.

The central claim of this article is therefore precise: Ghatak is not a science fiction filmmaker, but his Partition Trilogy produces perceptual estrangements that can be compared, with appropriate qualifications, to the critical work of science fiction. Partition functions as the historical novum that turns ordinary Bengal into a world of altered perception, where home becomes unhomely, kinship becomes unstable, and national belonging becomes haunted by loss. This argument does not detach the films from their Bengali and postcolonial specificity. On the contrary, it intensifies that specificity by showing how the trauma of Partition transforms concrete social spaces into unfamiliar and unstable environments.

The article proceeds in four stages. First, it situates Ghatak's Partition Trilogy within existing scholarship on melodrama, exile, female suffering, and postcolonial displacement.

Second, it clarifies the theoretical framework by linking melodramatic excess, trauma, unhomeliness, and cognitive estrangement into a single analytical structure. Third, it offers close readings of selected scenes from *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar*, and *Subarnarekha*, with particular attention to sound, railway imagery, mythological interruption, female suffering, and the transformation of domestic space. Finally, it argues that Ghatak's films give Bengal Partition a comparative resonance without erasing its historical specificity.

Method

This article uses close reading as its primary method. The analysis focuses on selected scenes from Ghatak's Partition Trilogy: *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961), and *Subarnarekha* (completed in 1962 and released in 1965). These films form a coherent corpus because each returns to the consequences of Partition through a distinct narrative structure: family sacrifice, theatrical and cultural division, caste conflict, poverty, and the collapse of home. The three films are also central to scholarship on Partition cinema and Ghatak's postcolonial film form (Sarkar, 2009; Roy, 2019).

The selected scenes are analyzed in relation to characters, space, mise-en-scène, sound, music, camera movement, mythological reference, and narrative interruption. The method does not aim to produce a comprehensive shot-by-shot analysis of the entire trilogy. Instead, it identifies recurring formal strategies that make the afterlife of Partition perceptually strange.

These include impossible or non-naturalistic sound cues, disrupted railway spaces, direct address, theatrical interruption, mythological intrusion, silence, blurred vision, and the destabilization of domestic interiors. The purpose of the close reading is to show how these devices transform melodramatic situations into moments of cognitive estrangement.

The article's interpretive focus is deliberately limited. It does not compare Ghatak's work with other Partition filmmakers, nor does it attempt an audience study or an archival reconstruction of production history. Its concern is the formal and theoretical relation between Ghatak's melodrama and estranged historical perception. This limitation allows the analysis to remain concentrated on the trilogy's cinematic language and on the central question of this article: how can science fiction theory be used without misclassifying Ghatak's films as science fiction? The argument developed here is that Suvin's concept can illuminate Ghatak's treatment of history when "historical novum" is understood as an analytical analogy, not as a literal genre classification.

Theoretical Framework: Melodrama, Trauma, Unhomeliness, and Cognitive Estrangement

The theoretical framework brings four concepts into dialogue rather than treating them as interchangeable explanations. Melodrama explains the emotional excess through which Ghatak makes historical suffering visible; trauma theory clarifies the belated, repetitive, and indirect forms through which Partition returns in sound, gesture, and memory; postcolonial theory,

especially Bhabha's notion of unhomeliness, accounts for the transformation of home into a site of estrangement; and Suvin's cognitive estrangement provides a vocabulary for understanding how Ghatak turns historical reality into an unfamiliar perceptual field. These concepts do not function as separate interpretive categories. They converge around the central claim that Partition operates in Ghatak's cinema as a historical novum, producing a world that is not futuristic but radically altered by displacement, loss, and divided belonging.

Melodrama is crucial because Ghatak's cinema repeatedly works through emotional intensity, moral pressure, sacrifice, music, and bodily suffering. Peter Brooks (1976/1995) describes melodrama as a mode that dramatizes the moral world after the collapse of traditional forms of authority. Christine Gledhill (1987) similarly treats melodrama not merely as a genre but as a broad narrative paradigm through which repressed social conflicts become visible. In Ghatak's films, melodrama does not soften historical violence. It gives form to experiences that cannot easily be represented through realist description alone. The excessive cry, the broken song, the sacrifice of the daughter, and the sudden shock of sound all make historical injury perceptible. The Harvard Film Archive (2008) also emphasizes the political force of Ghatak's melodrama, noting how his popular forms become vehicles for radical historical expression.

Trauma theory helps explain why Partition appears in Ghatak's films through repetition,

interruption, and indirect expression. Cathy Caruth (1995) argues that trauma is not fully grasped at the moment of its occurrence but returns belatedly, often through symptoms and repetitions. Ghatak's cinema is structured by this belatedness. Partition is rarely presented as a single historical event that has passed. It returns through sounds that do not belong naturally to the scene, through railway lines that suddenly stop, through songs that become laments, and through domestic spaces that become sites of exploitation or horror. Melodrama and trauma thus work together: melodramatic excess gives visible and audible form to an injury whose historical meaning exceeds the individual plot.

Postcolonial identity theory clarifies the political and spatial consequences of this injury. Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness names the condition in which the home is no longer a secure or private space but becomes marked by the violence of history (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 13, 144). For Ghatak's displaced characters, home is not simply lost; it is transformed. Refugee settlements, broken train lines, theatrical stages, brothel rooms, and ruined landscapes all become spaces in which the subject is neither fully at home nor entirely elsewhere. This unhomeliness is central to the films' depiction of divided identity. The characters are not simply nostalgic for an absent homeland; they inhabit a world whose ordinary coordinates have been altered by Partition.

Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement allows this altered world to be described with greater precision. For Suvin (1979), science fiction is defined by the interaction of cognition and estrangement: it creates a fictional world different from empirical reality but organized in a way that encourages critical comparison. In Suvin's original account, the novum is the fictional innovation that differentiates a speculative world from its empirical point of reference. In conventional science fiction, the novum may be technological, social, spatial, or temporal. Ghatak's films do not contain such a fictional novum. The present article instead uses the term analogically for Partition as a historical rupture. Partition produces a new reality in which familiar places and relations become strange: the homeland is divided, trains become signs of loss, family bonds become unstable, and the domestic interior becomes a haunted and exploitative space.

This extension of Suvin is a methodological analogy rather than an application of his strict definition of science fiction. Its value lies in a comparison of critical functions, not in establishing a genre identity. Fredric Jameson (1982) argues that science fiction often estranges the present rather than simply predicting the future. Csicsery-Ronay Jr. (2008) similarly emphasizes that the novum enables comparison between the reader's world and a transformed fictional context. Ghatak's films perform a comparable operation through historical form. They

compel the viewer to perceive post-Partition Bengal as a world made strange by political violence. This is why cognitive estrangement is more accurate than a broad genre label: it identifies a specific formal and perceptual operation without forcing Ghatak's films into a category to which they do not belong.

The cognitive dimension of estrangement is therefore crucial. Ghatak's films do not merely produce shock or emotional disturbance; they reorganize the viewer's understanding of historical causality. The disruptive train sound in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the broken railway in *Komal Gandhar*, and the unrecognizable family space in *Subarnarekha* all ask the viewer to connect private suffering to the political conditions that produce it. Estrangement has a cognitive dimension insofar as affect prompts reflection on the historical conditions represented. The spectator is moved by melodramatic pain, but also compelled to ask why such pain has become structurally possible in the post-Partition world.

Film Analyses

Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960): Sound, Female Suffering, and the Estranged Home

Meghe Dhaka Tara introduces estrangement not through speculative imagery but through the disturbance of everyday perception. Early passages place Neeta within a landscape whose apparent tranquility is repeatedly interrupted by railway noise. In one riverside encounter, the insistent sound of a passing train cuts across the characters' conversation. The sound is not

merely realistic background noise. It tears through the scene with a force that exceeds naturalistic continuity and makes the landscape feel unsafe. The train evokes the memory of refugee movement and historical displacement, but it also works formally: it detaches the viewer from the comfort of pastoral realism and introduces the post-Partition world as one already invaded by rupture (Chakravorty, 2020).

This opening sound is important because it shows how Ghatak converts melodramatic emotion into estranged perception. The scene does not ask the viewer simply to sympathize with Neeta. It asks the viewer to hear the world differently. The ordinary soundscape of home is penetrated by a mechanical violence that recalls the historical movement of bodies across borders. The train is therefore not just a symbol of modernity or migration; it is part of the film's historical novum. It signals that the world after Partition is no longer perceptually stable. The familiar countryside is already haunted by displacement.

Ghatak's use of non-naturalistic sound develops this logic throughout the film. The famous whip-crack sound associated with Neeta's inner suffering is especially significant. A whip crack has no realistic source within the scene, yet it registers the force of exploitation more sharply than a psychological explanation could. Carrigy (2003) discusses the force of Ghatak's whip-crack effect, while the amplified sound of boiling rice elsewhere in the film

makes domestic anxiety audible. These cues register emotional and social tensions beyond ordinary dialogue. These sounds do not simply heighten feeling; they detach feeling from realism. They make suffering audible as an external historical force acting upon the body. Neeta's pain is therefore not contained within private emotion. It is sonically projected into the film's world as the pressure of family, patriarchy, poverty, and displacement.

Because the source of the whip-crack sound is not visible, the viewer cannot localize suffering inside a single diegetic cause. The sound seems to strike from outside the frame, as if the historical world itself were assaulting Neeta. This is where the scene moves beyond psychological melodrama. Ghatak does not simply dramatize a woman's inner wound; he makes that wound audible as a social structure. The sound therefore functions as a perceptual rupture, converting the private space of feeling into an estranged field of historical violence.

The domestic space of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is central to this effect. The family home appears as the place where Neeta should find belonging, but it becomes the site of her gradual exhaustion. O'Donnell (2004) reads Ghatak's female figures in relation to homeland and post-Independence Bengali identity, while Natarajan (2018) emphasizes the film's critique of patriarchy and female sacrifice. Neeta is not only a melodramatic victim. She is the figure through whom the home becomes unhomely. Her labor sustains the family, yet the same family

consumes her youth, money, and health. The post-Partition household thus becomes an altered space: familiar in appearance, but organized by exploitation and loss.

The film's gender politics are therefore inseparable from its estrangement effect. The family repeatedly treats Neeta as the material condition of its survival while denying her full subjectivity. Her body becomes the point at which economic necessity, patriarchal expectation, and refugee precarity converge. The home is not simply inadequate; it is structurally inverted. It appears as shelter but operates as a mechanism of depletion. This inversion makes the domestic interior one of Ghatak's most powerful estranged spaces.

The final cry, "Dada, aami banchte chai!" ("Brother, I want to live!"), extends this estrangement to the level of space. At first, the cry seems to mark the emotional climax of an individual tragedy. Yet Ghatak refuses to keep it within the boundaries of the body. The image opens onto the surrounding hills, and Neeta's voice reverberates through the landscape. Kotecha (2019) describes the scene's echoing intensity. The cry becomes larger than Neeta herself: it is spatially enlarged, historically amplified, and dispersed into a world that does not answer. The result is not conventional catharsis. The viewer does not simply weep for Neeta; the viewer confronts a historical structure in which a woman's desire to live becomes almost impossible to sustain.

In this sense, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* shows that Ghatak's melodrama is already a cinema of cognitive estrangement. Its emotional force depends on sound, space, and female suffering, but those elements are organized so that the familiar world of family and home becomes strange. Partition as historical novum has transformed the domestic sphere into a site where gendered sacrifice and national trauma converge.

Komal Gandhar (1961): The Broken Railway and the Border as Perceptual Rupture

Komal Gandhar makes the connection between theater, exile, and estrangement explicit from its opening. An elderly actor, performing on stage, turns toward the camera and asks where he can go after being forced to leave the fertile lands of the Padma. The response from backstage—"It's time you became a refugee!"—collapses theatrical performance into historical reality. This is a Brechtian gesture, but it is also a post-Partition gesture. The spectator is not allowed to remain inside a stable fictional world. The stage becomes a site where the historical condition of refugeehood interrupts performance and forces recognition.

The film's central achievement, however, lies in the railway and border sequence. Anasuya and Bhrigu stand near the Padma and discuss the tracks that once connected places but are now interrupted by the border. The image of the railway is crucial because it transforms the border from an abstract political line into a broken perceptual field. The tracks promise movement, return, and continuity, yet they lead toward interruption. As the East Bengal folk

song “Dohai Ali” rises, the camera leaves the characters and moves along the empty tracks as if attached to an invisible train (Chakravorty, 2020). The viewer is pulled forward, but the movement cannot culminate in arrival. The song becomes a wail, the image darkens, and a whip-like sound marks the point of rupture.

This sequence provides a particularly clear example of Partition understood through the proposed historical-novum analogy. The border is not represented merely as geography. It becomes both material and metaphysical: material because the tracks have been cut and movement has been blocked; metaphysical because the viewer experiences an invisible historical force that reorganizes space itself. The camera’s forward motion produces the expectation of passage, but the blackout denies it. The scene therefore makes the border visible precisely as an interruption of visibility. What cannot be crossed becomes what the viewer is forced to perceive.

The formal composition of the sequence converts historical abstraction into bodily sensation. A map line could explain the border, but Ghatak makes the viewer feel its force through motion, sound, and the sudden withdrawal of image. The invisible train perspective produces a temporary fantasy of return, while the blackout cancels that fantasy at the very moment it becomes most intense. In this way the film creates a cognitive movement: the

spectator first inhabits desire for continuity and then confronts the impossibility of that continuity. The border is understood not only intellectually but perceptually.

The sequence also clarifies how melodrama and cognitive estrangement work together rather than against each other. The relationship between Anasuya and Bhriku carries longing, tenderness, and disappointment. Their bond is emotionally charged, but Ghatak refuses to resolve it through romantic closure. Instead, he transfers their longing onto a spatial form: the broken railway. The folk song's transformation into a wail further detaches emotion from individual psychology and places it within the historical condition of divided Bengal. The viewer feels the loss, but the film's formal interruption demands more than feeling. It asks the viewer to grasp Partition as a structure that has changed the meaning of movement, home, and cultural memory.

Anasuya's position in the film also matters. She is not simply a romantic figure. As a woman involved in theater and cultural work, she embodies the possibility of artistic continuity across division, yet her movement is constrained by the same historical forces that separate Bengal. Her subjectivity is tied to the film's broader question: can art create a space of shared memory when political borders have fractured community? The film's movement toward personal and theatrical reunion retains an unresolved historical tension: affective and artistic

solidarity can gesture toward a shared Bengal, but they cannot simply reverse the political border.

The theater collective itself deepens this problem. Performance creates the possibility of renewed collective life, although it cannot abolish the historical division shaping the performers' lives. This is why the film's metatheatrical moments are not decorative Brechtian gestures. They suggest that art can preserve and reimagine cultural connection without undoing the material consequences of Partition.

Through these devices, *Komal Gandhar* offers the clearest instance of estranged historical perception in the trilogy. The film turns the railway into an apparatus of cognition: it teaches the viewer to experience Partition not only as a historical event but as a transformed structure of space.

Subarnarekha (1965): Mythological Interruption and the Unhomely Space of Recognition

Subarnarekha extends Ghatak's estranged historical perception by bringing together Partition, caste, poverty, war debris, myth, and familial collapse. The early scene in which the children encounter the wreckage of a World War II plane is crucial; Kumar Shahani, in an interview with Sen (2024), calls this airfield sequence unparalleled in the history of cinema. Sita and Abhiram move through a deserted landscape and encounter the remains of another

historical catastrophe. The airplane wreckage does not belong to the innocent temporality of childhood play. It inserts global war into the refugee landscape and makes the new homeland appear already ruined. When a performer costumed as Kali appears, the unsettling image interrupts the children's play while remaining grounded in the impoverished social world around them.

The Kali-costumed figure should therefore be read as more than an uncanny or mythological image. Raychaudhuri (2009) argues that Ghatak reworks myth in order to confront the violence of Partition rather than escape into tradition. In this scene, a performed mythological image unsettles the modern landscape. The children's play is interrupted by an image that links maternal power, destruction, fear, and historical memory. The World War II ruin and the Kali mask together suggest that Partition is part of a layered field of violence. The historical novum does not erase earlier histories; it reorganizes them into a haunted landscape where childhood, war, caste, and displacement intersect.

This layering is especially important because *Subarnarekha* is not concerned only with refugee displacement. It also links displacement to caste hierarchy and economic abandonment. The relation between Sita and Abhiram already carries the tension of social difference, and the ruined landscape surrounding them suggests that no new beginning is innocent. The apparent

promise of resettlement is shadowed by older and newer forms of violence. The estrangement produced by the Kali image therefore does not float above history; it condenses several histories into a single visual shock.

The brothel scene later in the film intensifies this logic. Sita, having been forced into prostitution, encounters Ishwar, her brother, who enters as a drunken client and does not recognize her. The scene contains the elements of melodramatic coincidence, but Ghatak's formal treatment prevents it from becoming merely sensational. The camera blurs perception through Ishwar's unstable vision; the sound falls into near silence; Sita's breathing becomes the dominant audible sign of recognition and terror. The viewer understands before Ishwar does, and that asymmetry produces a painful estrangement. Recognition occurs, but it does not restore family. It destroys it.

The scene also complicates the very idea of recognition. In classical melodrama, recognition often produces moral revelation or emotional closure. Here, recognition is unbearable because it reveals that the structures meant to sustain identity have already collapsed. Ishwar's failure to recognize Sita is not only a function of drunkenness or partial blindness. It is the symptom of a world in which kinship has been severed from ethical knowledge. Sita sees the truth, but that truth offers no route back to home, family, or dignity.

The brothel is the trilogy's most extreme unhomely space. It is not only a tragic setting; it is a social condensation point where Partition, caste hierarchy, poverty, gendered vulnerability, and familial collapse converge. Bhabha's notion of unhomeliness is useful here because the scene turns the most intimate relation—brother and sister—into the most unbearable encounter. Home does not simply disappear; it returns in distorted form as a room where kinship can no longer protect, identify, or redeem. The scene therefore makes visible the social consequences of Partition without reducing them to a single cause. Sita's body bears the accumulated violence of displacement, patriarchy, caste, and economic abandonment.

Ishwar's cry of "Hey Ram" links private catastrophe to a wider vocabulary of national mourning; Dass (2017, p. 88) situates Ghatak's theatrical imagery within the broader historical ruptures represented by his cinema. Yet the force of the scene lies in its refusal of sentimental release. The silence, blurred vision, and delayed recognition turn melodramatic coincidence into historical estrangement. The viewer is not invited simply to pity Sita. The viewer is forced to confront a world in which the structures that should produce belonging—family, nation, home, and moral order—have become unrecognizable.

Subarnarekha thus pushes Ghatak's method to its most unsettling point. Mythological interruption, ruined landscape, silence, and the collapse of kinship reveal the altered world

produced by Partition as historical novum. The film's horror is not supernatural; it is historical reality made strange enough to be perceived.

Findings and Discussion

The analyses above show that Ghatak's Partition Trilogy produces cognitive estrangement through specifically cinematic means: sound, movement, interruption, spatial rupture, mythological intrusion, and the transformation of home into an unhomely site. The films do not become science fiction, nor do they require technological speculation or futurity. Instead, they perform a function comparable to the critical operation of science fiction: they make familiar spaces appear strange in order to foreground the histories of violence and displacement that reorganize them.

This account also situates the argument within Ghatak scholarship. Earlier readings have rightly emphasized melodrama, myth, female suffering, and the politics of Partition. The present argument does not replace those readings; it extends them by asking how Ghatak's formal choices alter the viewer's perception of history. Estrangement is therefore not an external theory imposed on the films. It names a recurring operation already present in their soundscapes, spatial structures, and interruptions of narrative continuity.

The key theoretical revision is to understand Partition as a historical novum. This concept

allows the article to connect Suvin's science fiction theory with postcolonial displacement without overstating the genre claim. In Ghatak's films, Partition is the new historical condition that reorganizes social life. It changes the meaning of trains, borders, songs, family relations, houses, and landscapes. Here, the proposed "historical novum" is not a Suvinian fictional device within the story; it names the rupture that makes the represented world perceptually different from the world remembered before Partition. This explains why Ghatak's cinema often feels both realist and otherworldly: the material world is recognizable, but its coordinates have been altered by displacement and loss.

Melodrama is indispensable to this process. Ghatak's use of melodrama does not merely intensify emotion; it exposes the contradictions of postcolonial society. Levich (1997, p. 30) reports Ghatak's own description of a film as "a Brechtian exercise in epic style," and this phrase captures the tension between emotional involvement and critical distance. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Neeta's cry is at once the expression of personal suffering and the historical amplification of a generation's injury. In *Komal Gandhar*, romantic longing is transferred onto the broken railway, making private desire inseparable from geopolitical fracture. In *Subarnarekha*, the family melodrama becomes a political allegory of caste, poverty, and national division. Melodrama therefore provides the emotional charge through which estrangement becomes affectively powerful.

Trauma theory clarifies why this estrangement repeatedly takes indirect and disruptive forms. Partition returns not as a completed past but as a pressure within the present: a sound without visible source, a railway without destination, a song that becomes a wail, a mythological image that interrupts childhood, and a home that returns as a brothel room. These repetitions and interruptions are consistent with Caruth's (1995) understanding of trauma as belated and difficult to assimilate. Ghatak's formal strategies show that historical trauma cannot be contained within linear narrative. It erupts into perception.

Postcolonial unhomeliness explains the spatial logic of the trilogy. Ghatak's characters are not simply homeless in the literal sense; they inhabit spaces that have become unfamiliar from within. The refugee settlement in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the theatrical and railway spaces of *Komal Gandhar*, and the brothel room and ruined landscapes of *Subarnarekha* all show how Partition transforms social space. Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness is therefore not an additional theory placed beside cognitive estrangement; it is the spatial and political condition through which estrangement becomes visible.

The contribution lies in bringing these frameworks together without treating them as interchangeable. Melodrama accounts for emotional excess; trauma theory accounts for belated repetition; postcolonial theory accounts for divided belonging and unhomeliness; cognitive

estrangement accounts for the altered mode of perception produced by historical rupture. Together, they show that Ghatak's Partition Trilogy gives Bengal Partition a comparative and transnational resonance while remaining rooted in its specific Bengali, postcolonial, and gendered contexts. This distinction is important because the films do not universalize displacement by stripping away local detail. Rather, their wider resonance emerges precisely from the concrete historical textures of Bengal Partition.

This synthesis also helps clarify why the article retains a relation to science fiction theory while avoiding a genre claim. If the analysis were limited to melodrama, it might explain Ghatak's emotional force but not fully account for the way his films make reality itself appear altered. If it were limited to trauma theory, it might explain repetition and belatedness but not the comparative structure through which one world is measured against another. Used analogically, cognitive estrangement connects these dimensions. It names the moment when historical suffering becomes a changed world, and when cinematic form makes that change perceptible to the viewer.

Conclusion

Reading Ghatak's Partition Trilogy through the lens of cognitive estrangement reveals another dimension of his melodramatic form. It reveals melodrama not simply as emotional excess but as a form that reorganizes perception after historical catastrophe. The cry, the song,

the railway, the mythological interruption, the ruined landscape, and the unhomely domestic space are not only expressive devices. They are ways of making the altered reality of Partition perceptible.

The article has therefore proposed Partition as a historical analogue of the novum in Ghatak's cinema. Unlike the technological or futuristic novum often associated with science fiction, this novum is a political and historical rupture. It produces a world in which home no longer guarantees belonging, kinship no longer guarantees recognition, and landscape no longer guarantees continuity. The familiar world remains visible, but it is no longer stable. This is the source of Ghatak's estranged historical perception.

This framework also reframes Partition cinema more broadly. Ghatak's films do not only mourn loss; they show how loss transforms the very conditions under which the world is perceived. Exile is therefore not merely the absence of homeland. It is a perceptual transformation of reality, a condition in which ordinary spaces and relations appear unfamiliar because history has reorganized them. Such a reading clarifies why Ghatak's films remain powerful: they do not allow Partition to become a closed historical event. They make its afterlife audible, visible, and spatially present.

The selective use of Suvin's cognitive estrangement thus offers a productive, if

necessarily qualified, contribution to Ghatak scholarship. It does not turn Ghatak into a science fiction filmmaker. Instead, it shows that science fiction theory can illuminate the critical function of estrangement in a postcolonial melodramatic cinema. Ghatak's films transform Bengal Partition into an estranged perceptual world whose specificity is never abandoned but whose implications extend beyond a single national context. This is the theoretical gain of the approach: it allows melodrama, trauma, postcolonial displacement, and estranged perception to be understood as interconnected dimensions of Ghatak's visionary film form.

EDITOR'S NOTE ON RELATED SCHOLARSHIP

For an alternative account of Ghatak's Bengali cultural memory and the tension between refugee identity and differences of caste, class, and gender, see Banerjee (2023). Biswas (2021) offers a close reading of *Subarnarekha* as an exploration of homelessness and representation, and Francis (2026), also in this issue of *CINEJ*, reads the same film through landscape, montage, and affective memory, which complements the present article's account of the film's railway, airfield, and brothel sequences. Rajadhyaksha (1982) remains a foundational study of Ghatak's epic form and bears on the Brechtian and mythological dimensions discussed here. For a reading that places Ghatak's *Ajantrik* (1958) within a Bengali tradition of science fiction cinema, a useful comparison for this article's qualified use of Suvin, see Jahangir (2016). These sources add critical counterpoints without changing the present article's film-based argument.

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