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Counter-Memory and Gendered Trauma in Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*: Melodrama, Sound, and Partition

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Abstract: This article examines how Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) makes gendered displacement after the 1947 Partition of Bengal visible through cinematic counter-memory. Through close analysis of framing, sound, lighting, and recurring motifs, it argues that melodrama conveys historical injury often minimized in accounts of national progress. Neeta's labor sustains her refugee family, yet her own aspirations remain unacknowledged. Intrusive train sounds, the boiling-rice motif, shadowed interiors, images of confinement, and her final cry connect domestic exploitation to Partition's afterlives. Rather than reducing Neeta to a passive national allegory, the article examines the tension between her agency and the obligations imposed on her. Ghatak's film thus links melodrama, gendered labor, and historical remembrance.

Keywords: Ritwik Ghatak; *Meghe Dhaka Tara*; counter-memory; Partition of Bengal; feminist film analysis; melodrama; sound design; cultural memory

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Counter-Memory and Gendered Trauma in Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*: Melodrama, Sound, and Partition

Ramazan Arslan

Introduction

Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ghatak, 1960) explores the aftermath of the 1947 Partition of Bengal through the life of Neeta, a young woman whose earnings sustain a displaced family. The film relates refugee precarity to unequal domestic obligations without reducing either to private misfortune. Its sound design, close-ups, light-and-shadow contrasts, and recurring images of confinement make the historical pressures on Neeta's life perceptible. This article argues that Ghatak mobilizes melodrama as a practice of cinematic counter-memory: the film brings into view losses and social contradictions that official narratives of national independence can marginalize. Drawing on film-form analysis and scholarship on collective memory and gender, the discussion asks how Neeta's labor becomes both indispensable and overlooked, and how audiovisual devices connect family demands with the afterlife of Partition. In doing so, it joins wider debates on the cinematic remembrance of Partition (Sarkar, 2009) and Ghatak's negotiation of Bengali cultural memory (Banerjee, 2023).

History, Trauma, and Counter-Memory

Public accounts of the past are selective. States, institutions, and communities organize

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events through commemorations, monuments, rituals, and historical narratives, often making some experiences more visible than others. Collective memory is therefore neither a neutral inventory of facts nor a simple opposition between an official version and an authentic popular one. It is shaped by competing accounts of belonging, suffering, and political legitimacy (Öktemer, 2019, pp. 55–59). The concept of counter-memory is useful when cultural works recover marginalized experiences or challenge the terms through which a dominant narrative represents the past. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Ghatak does not offer a competing chronology of Partition. He renders its consequences visible through the spaces, bodies, and sounds of an economically vulnerable refugee household.

The 1947 Partition of Bengal was politically contested and experienced differently across communities. Scholarship on its causes, including Chatterji's (1994) study, examines the political mobilizations and communal divisions preceding Partition; the event should not be reduced to a uniform victory for one community or to a single refugee experience. In West Bengal, displacement unfolded through extended movements of people and uneven state responses rather than through one brief moment of transfer. The film attends particularly to the precarious lives of Hindu refugees from East Bengal. Its limited perspective is central to this article's analysis, although it cannot stand for every experience of Partition.

Trauma describes experiences that may overwhelm ordinary means of understanding and continue to affect how the past is remembered in the present (Gülmez, 2021, p. 131). In cultural analysis, however, trauma should not be diagnosed from a film's imagery or presumed to operate identically in every individual. Jelača (2016) shows how screen narratives can disturb chronological distance, making earlier violence felt as a pressure within the present. This temporal framework helps explain how Ghatak's recurring sounds, objects, and spaces connect present household difficulties to the historical rupture of Partition.

Individual and collective memories change through recollection, interpretation, and social context. Traumatic experience may return insistently or be difficult to narrate, but it does not render a person's recollections permanently fixed (Evecen, 2023, pp. 42–43). Rather than infer Ghatak's psychological condition from biography, the present analysis examines how his film constructs patterns of repetition and interruption. These patterns make historical loss perceptible while leaving open differences between cinematic representation and individual experience.

Remembering a collective catastrophe involves unequal capacities to speak, to be heard, and to determine which losses enter public history. Herman's (2015) account of trauma and recovery emphasizes safety, remembrance, and reconnection, although a clinical framework cannot simply be transferred to an entire nation. The displacement of millions after Partition

involved uneven access to work, housing, and state assistance, and refugee populations were at times portrayed by established residents as burdens on scarce resources (Chakrabarti, 1990). Ghatak's refugee family is situated within this unequal social world. The film asks how historical injury continues to shape the everyday distribution of care and economic responsibility.

For Bergson (1896/1991), memory cannot be understood as the passive storage of an unchanged past: recollection is involved in present perception and action. Halbwachs (1992) likewise places recollection within social frameworks, stressing that groups shape the terms in which individuals remember. Cultural representations help organize these frameworks even for people who did not witness particular events. Shared places, languages, rituals, and inherited narratives can preserve a sense of belonging, but they can also privilege certain accounts over others (Aydın, 2022). These questions are particularly relevant to a film that addresses national rupture through intimate domestic scenes.

Assmann (2011) distinguishes communicative memory, sustained chiefly through living interactions, from cultural memory, supported over longer periods by texts, rituals, institutions, and other symbolic forms. Film can participate in this circulation by giving earlier events new sensory and narrative forms. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* does not transmit Partition through

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documentary testimony alone. It connects remembered displacement to a recurring train sound, the cramped household, and Neeta's increasingly constrained movement. Such devices allow a particular refugee experience to acquire cultural visibility without making it equivalent to all refugee experiences.

Remembering and forgetting are intertwined rather than simply opposed (Göle, 2007, pp. 25–26; Neyzi, 2011). The task of a counter-memory reading is not to declare that a film cures historical trauma or makes forgetting "healthy." Instead, it is to ask how cinematic representation resists the disappearance of experiences that remain politically and emotionally consequential. Ghatak's film repeatedly confronts the viewer with conditions that the language of national progress cannot adequately resolve.

Places provide material frameworks for recollection. Home, neighborhood, and familiar routes can evoke experiences that might be lost in abstract accounts of a historical event (Demircioğlu, 2019, pp. 66–67). The refugee settlement and the family's interior spaces in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* are therefore more than settings. They render visible the distance between the promise of post-Independence belonging and the persistent precarity of those displaced by Partition. Camera placement and framing reinforce these pressures, particularly when Neeta is seen through doors, windows, and other obstructing structures.

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Public memory can marginalize experiences that complicate triumphant accounts of a community or a nation (Demircioğlu, 2019). Herman (2015) argues that, in clinical contexts, recovery from trauma involves the possibility of narrating experience within safe relationships. This insight suggests an analogy with cultural representation, but it does not authorize a claim that cinema itself brings collective psychological recovery. The film's contribution lies instead in giving a historically neglected form of suffering an audiovisual presence. Neeta's personal story becomes a way to ask who bears the costs of displacement, and why those costs are so unevenly distributed.

The transformation of distress into narrative is an important concern in trauma scholarship (Herman, 2015). In cinema, narrative also works through duration, framing, sound, and the relation between visible and offscreen space. Ghatak transforms the post-Partition refugee predicament into a story of domestic obligation in which repeated aesthetic motifs link otherwise ordinary events. The film should not be treated as transparent testimony to the director's interior life. Its formal construction enables a political interpretation of history through a fictional household.

Counter-memory names an intervention into the selection and organization of what a society remembers. It need not claim that every official account is wholly false or that every

artistic account is free from ideological constraints.

As a counter-memory text, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* draws attention to refugee hardship, gendered dependency, and economic insecurity that can be minimized within narratives of national achievement. Film and television can mediate memory through audiovisual form, repetition, and circulation across generations (Duruel Erkılıç, 2014; Liktor, 2022; Yelsalı Parmaksız, 2019). Ghatak's film does not simply tell audiences that Partition caused suffering. It builds an experience of interruption: a train overwhelms conversation, a family home restricts personal choice, and a woman's final cry travels beyond the immediate scene.

The film can therefore be approached as both a domestic melodrama and a work of historical remembrance. The connection between those dimensions must be demonstrated in its visual and acoustic form rather than assumed from its subject matter alone.

Cinema offers a means of circulating representations of the past beyond the generation that experienced them directly (Duruel Erkılıç, 2014). The following discussion therefore considers melodrama not as the opposite of historical insight but as one of the formal means through which history becomes sensible.

Melodrama, Gender, and Historical Experience

Melodrama is often associated with heightened emotion, moral conflict, vulnerable

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characters, and expressive uses of performance and music (Gülmez, 2023). Yet it is neither restricted to a simple opposition of good and evil nor defined by a reassuring conclusion. Melodramatic form can expose tensions that a social order leaves unresolved. Ghatak draws on its emotional and audiovisual excess to bring collective displacement into the sphere of familial obligation and personal loss.

Melodrama may dramatize injury through coincidences, reversals, sacrifice, and the struggle for recognition; its outcomes are not necessarily happy or morally settled (Bayol, 2013). In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the central contradiction is that Neeta's family depends on her earnings while her prospects for an independent life diminish. This arrangement complicates the apparent moral clarity of sacrifice. What seems virtuous from the family's standpoint becomes destructive when considered from Neeta's perspective.

The film's melodramatic devices include emotionally charged scenes, symbolic contrasts, music, and recurring configurations of power. Such devices need not simply legitimize prevailing norms: they can also make those norms available for criticism (Çelik, 2021). Here, the staging of Neeta's sacrifice is inseparable from the film's scrutiny of family authority and the unequal demands placed on women. Melodrama carries the argument through images and sounds as well as through dialogue.

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The association of women with caregiving and self-sacrifice is a recurring concern in studies of melodrama (Baş, 2019; Kürkçüoğlu, 2021). The critical question is whether a film naturalizes those expectations or exposes the circumstances under which they become coercive. Ghatak repeatedly stages Neeta as both the financial support of her family and a person whose own desires are postponed. This tension prevents the figure from being reduced either to a passive victim or to an uncomplicated emblem of national suffering.

Because melodrama often turns on the disruption of family and social order, it can articulate historical anxieties beyond individual psychology (Gülmez, 2023). Ghatak's film is especially resistant to the idea that virtue will eventually be rewarded. Neeta's loyalty does not restore the household or protect her health. The absence of such reassurance allows melodrama to challenge the sentimental promise that devotion alone can overcome structural inequality.

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, melodrama is thus not merely a device for eliciting sympathy. Through image and sound, it makes the social, economic, and political consequences of Partition perceptible in the life of one refugee family.

Patriarchal Labor and the Burden of Care

Patriarchal structures distribute authority, care, and domestic labor unequally, often making women responsible for sustaining families while limiting their choices (Aktaş, 2013; Tekin & Demirel Değirmenci, 2022). These expectations are neither uniform across societies

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nor automatically accepted by all women. In Neeta's family, however, the pressure to provide financially and emotionally is concentrated in her. The film's critique lies partly in showing how dependence on women's labor can coexist with the denial of their autonomy.

Domestic labor becomes a gendered obligation when care and household responsibilities are treated as naturally feminine rather than as shared work (Bora, 2010). Cinema may reproduce such norms, but it can also dramatize their costs and contradictions (Aslan, 2019; Ekici, 2016). Neeta's participation in paid work does not secure her independence: her earnings are absorbed by family needs, while other members' ambitions are allowed to take precedence. This is a specific cinematic representation of patriarchal dependency, not evidence that every woman in Bengali society occupies the same position.

Accordingly, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* should be read as interrogating a patriarchal social arrangement rather than merely reflecting it. Neeta's apparent willingness to sacrifice is repeatedly placed under pressure by the film's framing, soundtrack, and tragic trajectory.

Method and Scope

This article uses qualitative close reading and formal film analysis of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ghatak, 1960). It examines selected sequences in which Neeta's financial and emotional responsibilities intersect with images and sounds associated with displacement. The analysis

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attends to recurring train sounds, the boiling-rice motif, strong light-and-shadow contrasts, framing through barriers, and the final cry. Narrative context is read alongside cinematography, editing, mise-en-scène, and sound design, rather than treating images as transparent illustrations of pre-existing theory. The corpus is one feature film, so the study does not claim to measure audience responses or establish a general rule for Bengali cinema. Its aim is to demonstrate how specific formal decisions support a counter-memory reading of Partition and gendered trauma.

Close Reading: Neeta, Sound, and Counter-Memory

Meghe Dhaka Tara follows Neeta, a young woman in an impoverished refugee family in post-Partition West Bengal. Her wages support the household as her own ambitions are deferred. Her fiancé Sanat develops a relationship with her sister, and the demands of work and care leave Neeta increasingly isolated. She eventually develops tuberculosis. This narrative makes the family an ambivalent space: it provides social belonging while also drawing on Neeta's labor in ways that threaten her future. The film does not simply illustrate individual misfortune; it asks the viewer to connect domestic exploitation with the precarity of displacement.

Meaning in film emerges through the interaction of narration, image, dialogue, music, silence, and sound effects rather than through spoken language alone (Kotan, 2025). Ghatak's formal choices are especially important because they render emotional pressure perceptible

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without always explaining it through dialogue. Abrupt sounds interrupt intimate encounters; tight framing creates visual barriers; and lighting isolates faces within shared domestic spaces. These devices help connect Neeta's psychological experience with a wider historical context, although no single image or sound can be assigned one fixed meaning outside its sequence.

The film's protagonist, Neeta, carries a significance that goes beyond her role in the plot. Through Neeta, the film conveys the experience of otherness, displacement, and the breakdown of cultural and moral norms within both society and the family that followed the Partition of Bengal. In other words, Neeta bears historical trauma through the female body. Throughout the film, Neeta repeatedly sets her own desires aside for her family, striving to provide for them until she eventually burns out. In the scenes where Neeta, who has given up her desires for her family, encounters Sanat and her desires seem likely to be stirred, the repeated use of sudden cuts to close-ups of her mother's tense face, accompanied by the sound of bubbling water, conveys that Neeta's desires are perceived as a threat to the family (Figure 1).

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Figure 1: Close-up of Neeta's mother with the sound of boiling water.

Another auditory element that recurs throughout the film is the jarring sound of trains. Beyond being a natural sound, these recurring train noises serve as an auditory representation of historical trauma. Both by the river and at Neeta's home, train sounds interrupt whenever her fiancé, Sanat, is about to express his emotions, thereby hindering emotional expression between the characters (Figure 2). In short, the train sound becomes prominent precisely at the moments when Neeta's desires might emerge. The way these train sounds obstruct communication and individual desires serves as an auditory embodiment of how subjectivity is undermined by past traumas. Because the train motif evokes migration, becoming a refugee, and displacement in the context of the Partition of Bengal, it becomes a symbol of the repressed collective trauma.

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Figure 2: The scene where the passing train drowns out the dialogue during Neeta and Sanat's conversation.

The sharp contrast between light and shadow, with part of the character's face left completely in darkness, is used as a technique to convey the pressures of emotional and social fragmentation. In the scene depicted in Figure 3, the stark contrast, with one part of the face illuminated while the other remains in darkness, reveals a character who is needed and functional within the family but who suppresses her personal desires. The shadows isolate Neeta emotionally.



Figure 3: The harsh shadow on Neeta's face.

In the scenes with her family, the harsh interplay of light and shadow, with other members of Neeta's family illuminated while she remains partly in shadow, visually suggests how the burden of her family weighs on Neeta. Consequently, this light-shadow contrast draws a clear line between family responsibilities and her own desires, expressing that Neeta's individuality has been lost and that she is being exploited by her family. The way shadows divide the character can be associated with a sense of fragmentation and incompleteness following the split. In this context, the light-shadow contrast is used not to aestheticize the visual but as a tool to convey suppressed individual desires and historical trauma.

Throughout the film, close-ups of Neeta's face are frequently rendered with stark light-and-shadow contrast. Although close-ups are typically used in melodramas to create emotional

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intensity, in this film they are employed not only to convey Neeta's emotional condition but also to cinematically depict her sense of being trapped and isolated, both in her personal life and within the social framework. In this regard, showing Neeta's face in close-ups not only conveys the character's emotional intensity but also visually illustrates who bears the financial burden within the family following the separation. Furthermore, in all the scenes where Neeta speaks longingly of the past, expressing nostalgia, the close-up of her face and her generally bittersweet smile convey her longing for the time before the division; this also positions Neeta as the bearer of historical trauma. The close-up shots in the scene where she says, "We used to walk up those hills," and in the final scene where she is told, "At least you'll be able to see the valley," serve as visual expressions of this longing for a lost past.

Neeta's wage-earning labor sustains the family, while other members retain comparatively greater freedom to pursue their own ambitions. The visual pattern of confining frames makes this imbalance legible. Neeta is repeatedly photographed through latticework, thresholds, and cramped interiors (Figure 5), so that the image itself seems to obstruct movement. Such compositions do not simply illustrate a general claim about patriarchy: within the specific story of a displaced household, they make the unequal distribution of care and opportunity visible. Her brother Shankar's observation that Neeta rarely expresses what she

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feels underscores this gap between the work she performs and the recognition she receives. The still reproduced in Figure 4 is one instance of this recurring arrangement.



Figure 4: A close-up shot where part of Neeta's face is in darkness.



Figure 5: Neeta framed against a surface creating a cage-like effect.

The film's portrayal of Neeta's domestic labor exposes how paid work may reproduce,

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rather than dissolve, gendered obligations. Neeta contributes to the household economy, yet the family's dependence on her income is repeatedly presented as an expectation rather than a choice. Her birthday's association with Jagaddhatri Puja invites a reading of Neeta through the figure of the sustaining goddess, although this symbolic parallel should not be mistaken for an uncomplicated celebration of sacrifice. Mythic elevation can intensify the contradiction between the reverence accorded to an idealized woman and the limited freedom available to a living one. The film's attention to Neeta's everyday movement and private disappointment (Figure 6) prevents her from becoming only a religious or national allegory.



Figure 6: Neeta's appearance in public with an umbrella.

The film repeatedly places obstacles between Neeta and the possibility of speaking freely. Train sounds and intrusive effects sometimes interrupt conversation; the recurring sandal motif connects her experience with another woman near the conclusion. These devices need not imply

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a fixed fate for every woman. Instead, they suggest the persistence of gendered obligations across individual lives. Neeta's suffering becomes historically resonant not because she stands for all women or every refugee, but because the film makes the unequal labor of rebuilding a household visible. Its images of separation and bodily confinement allow the social costs of Partition to be felt within ordinary domestic arrangements.

The film repeatedly contrasts Neeta's contribution to the family with the lack of space accorded to her independent future. Her paid employment remains tied to obligations of care rather than to personal freedom. Although the family's difficulties are real, the unequal distribution of sacrifice becomes part of the film's critical force. Framing and editing complicate any simple assumption that Neeta silently consents: her restrained gestures, interrupted conversations, and isolated position in group compositions make the emotional cost visible. The recurring sandal motif, which links Neeta to another woman near the film's close (Figure 7), suggests that her predicament extends beyond one character. Rather than establishing a timeless "fate" for women, the visual echo points to the persistence of social arrangements that render women's labor essential while denying them recognition. The broader historical question is how the dislocations of Partition sharpened these inequalities without solely causing them.

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Figure 7: The scene where the film ends with the sandal tearing.

The fact that Neeta maintains a soft, subdued tone throughout the film and then cries out at the end is a reactive expression of feelings suppressed throughout the narrative. Since the societal trauma is conveyed through Neeta's female body, her expression of the desire to live can be interpreted as the collective rebellion of a community that became displaced, exiled, and reduced to refugee status following the Partition of Bengal. This is because the film as a whole serves as a microcosm of the displaced community after the Partition of Bengal.

The final cry is the film's strongest convergence of personal feeling and collective history. Neeta's desire to live is not simply the climax of an individual tragedy: the voice expands into the surrounding landscape, refusing to remain contained within the domestic story that has constrained her. Earlier intrusions of train noise and the recurring use of intense sound effects make this final expansion particularly forceful. The film's close-ups, shadows, enclosed interiors, and repeated images of passage connect her experience to the uneasy temporality of life after Partition. These choices do not imply that Neeta represents every displaced woman,

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nor do they resolve the historical losses being invoked. They make those losses available to critique as part of a gendered social world. In that sense, melodrama becomes a mode of counter-memory: it creates an affective and formal encounter with events and obligations not comfortably accommodated within the nation's rhetoric of progress. The crucial achievement is not simply that viewers may feel pity, but that the film encourages them to ask why Neeta's care, labor, and freedom are so unequally valued.

Conclusion

This study has argued that Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* makes a form of cinematic counter-memory through melodrama. The film places Neeta's family obligations in the historical context of refugee displacement and gives those pressures aesthetic force through recurring sounds, constrained interiors, and expressive editing. Its treatment of Neeta is neither a transparent record of Partition nor an uncomplicated image of female passivity. Instead, it examines the contradiction between her indispensable labor and the shrinking space for her own desires.

A feminist reading also complicates the familiar tendency to make the suffering woman stand straightforwardly for a wounded nation. Neeta's experience has allegorical resonance, but her material work, interpersonal relations, and particular vulnerabilities must not disappear beneath that allegory. The film makes visible how gender and economic dependency shape the

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lived afterlife of historical rupture, while leaving some aspects of that social order open to interpretation.

The recurring train, the boiling-rice sound, light-and-shadow contrasts, and visual barriers become historically significant through their placement within the film. No one device independently proves the existence of collective trauma. Together, however, they create a repeated movement between private conflict and the wider conditions of displacement. Neeta's concluding cry carries the ethical force of this movement: it demands recognition of a life whose value has repeatedly been measured by what it provides for others. This is what gives Ghatak's melodrama its political dimension.

The case study is limited to one film and cannot establish how all audiences experience its sound and imagery. Nevertheless, it shows how cinema can challenge selective remembrance without substituting another totalizing account of history. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* holds the emotional and structural dimensions of loss in tension, making the costs of Partition visible through the gendered dynamics of family life. Its contribution to cultural memory lies in refusing to separate the history of displacement from the ordinary but unequal labor of sustaining a home.

Editor's note: For related discussion of the film's cultural politics and the risks of compressing class, caste, and gender differences into a single Bengali refugee identity, see Banerjee (2023), published in CINEJ. Sarkar (2009) provides a broader framework for the cinematic afterlives of Partition. These works complement the article's focus on counter-memory and gendered labor.

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O'Donnell (2004) reads Neeta as a sacrificed goddess figure and attends to the film's sound effects, including the amplified boiling kettle, which bears directly on the argument here, while Das and Charvak (2025) and Barman (2022) discuss the film's feminist and refugee themes within Ghatak's wider work. Two further essays in this issue of CINEJ read Ghatak's Partition films through related frameworks: Francis (2026) on landscape, memory, and affect in Subarnarekha, and Erdem (2026) on cognitive estrangement in the Partition Trilogy.

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