

LA  
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**FILM CLUB**



Indian Film Series  
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Ritwik Ghatak  
1925-1976

The Cloud-Capped Star  
1960

## Poetry and Partition: The Films of Ritwik Ghatak

Article sourced from Screen Slate: <https://www.screenslate.com/series/1736>

Bengali-born director, poet, and actor Ritwik Ghatak's career was one of constant struggle—against a public that, per his contemporary Satyajit Ray, “largely ignored” his films; against a society that had lost its way amid rampant modernization; and against a national cinema whose conventions he broke time and again. He only completed eight fiction feature films during his lifetime, but each represents a landmark achievement in the history of Indian cinema, movingly reflecting the social realities of a nation trying to revise its identity in the aftermath of British colonial rule and the partition of India and Pakistan, and representing the melodrama of everyday life under the country's newly modernized economy. Join Film at Lincoln Center for a retrospective of Ghatak's work, including recent digital restorations of his epochal films.

## Ritwik Ghatak's Pursuit of Truth Beyond Realism

Hillary Weston • Sept. 13, 2019

Article sourced from Criterion: <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/6585-ritwik-ghatak-s-pursuit-of-truth-beyond-realism>

With *The Cloud-Capped Star*, Bengali director Ritwik Ghatak reinvented the melodrama. The story of a refugee family's increasing dependence on self-sacrificing eldest daughter Neeta (Supriya Choudhury), the 1960 film makes innovative use of an array of striking techniques—including elliptical editing, off-balance framings, and varied performance styles—as its domestic tragedy unfolds. The video above is a clip from a supplement on our brand-new edition of *The Cloud-Capped Star*, in which acclaimed Indian filmmakers Saeed Akhtar Mirza and Kumar Shahani discuss some of these devices and how they help endow the movie with its uncommon emotional power. Here, Mirza delivers an impassioned appreciation of the film's “enhanced realism”—its dexterous interweaving of elements both expressionistic (the densely layered soundtrack) and naturalistic (Choudhury's supremely moving lead performance)—while Shahani identifies a seemingly simple, vérité-like scene shot on the streets of Kolkata as one way that Ghatak draws viewers into the heightened reality of his pathos-filled story.

## Ritwik Ghatak, Non-Conformist

David Hudson • Oct. 31, 2019

Article sourced from Criterion: <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/6668-ritwik-ghatak-non-conformist>

The 1950s saw the emergence of a group of primarily Bengali filmmakers whose work, rooted in social realism and shot through with the trauma of the partition of India in 1947, rejected the conventions of mainstream Indian cinema. The vaguely defined movement would become known as parallel cinema, and its one true international star director is, of course, Satyajit Ray. Ritwik Ghatak, on the other hand, is “the unknown great among the independent Indian directors of the twentieth century,” as the Arsenal put it on the occasion of retrospective in Berlin in 2016. Starting tomorrow, Film at Lincoln Center in New York will present new restorations of seven of the eight features Ghatak made in his short lifetime. In 1976, having struggled with illness, alcoholism, and—despite Ray championing his work—neglect, Ghatak died at the age of fifty.

Ghatak's films are "nervier, more radically modern than Ray's," writes Adrian Martin in the essay accompanying our release of *A River Called Titas* (1973). "He gave his work a palpable texture of constant shock, and part of the reason for this was personal." Like millions of Bengali families, Ghatak's was uprooted by famine in 1943 and the violence that broke out when the province was divided in 1947. In Calcutta (now Kolkata), Ghatak joined the Communist Party and the progressive Indian People's Theater Association, wrote poetry, short stories, novels, and plays, and translated Bertolt Brecht. "Like Brecht," writes Adrian Martin, "Ghatak was keen to promote both emotional involvement and analytical distance on the spectator's part, in a seesawing, dialectical movement. Cinema seemed the ideal form for his vision." As a filmmaker, Ghatak "was at once a sharply rational man and a completely, uncontrollably emotional one, and the dimension of melodrama that pushes toward constant hysteria offered him a way to fully enact, on-screen, over and over, his own traumatic experience of Bengali history." In a primer for the *Hindu*, Srikanth Srinivasan likens Ghatak's use of melodrama to that of Kenji Mizoguchi and Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

Ghatak's second feature, *The Pathetic Fallacy* (1958), is a road movie in which a provincial taxi driver, alienated by the social upheaval all around him, finds that his closest friend is his old Chevrolet. "Arguably one of the most idiosyncratic art films to have emerged from the 1950s," writes Omar Ahmed, *The Pathetic Fallacy* "utilizes a remarkably layered sound design and unsentimental narrative approach to produce a poignant and funny depiction of the awkward relationship between man and machine." In what many consider to be his lightest work, *The Runaway* (1959), a ten-year-old boy escapes from his small village—and his father's cruelty—to the big city. Ghatak followed up with what Bedatri Datta Choudhury, writing for Screen Slate, has called his "artfully melodramatic magnum opus," *The Cloud-Capped Star* (1960).

The story centers on Neeta (Supriya Choudhury), a young woman whose hopes and dreams are dashed over and over again as she sacrifices her future for the sake of her refugee family. As Ira Bhaskar points out here in the Current, "Ghatak is powerfully critiquing a Bengali culture that venerates the Goddess but is so cruel to its women." Reviewing *The Cloud-Capped Star* for Slant, Derek Smith observes that, as he delves into "the inner worlds of characters living on the fringes of society and enduring myriad injustices, the Bengali filmmaker taps into something at once strange and stirring through his singular, melodramatic fusion of offbeat humor, off-kilter framing, and editing rhythms, as well as through an experimental use of sound and music that's alternately beautiful and jarring in its disorienting effects."

With *E-Flat* (1961), Ghatak looked back to his work with the Indian People's Theater Association and the political rivalries that tore the group apart. While Lincoln Center notes that "the demise of the group forever alienated Ghatak from the Bengali intellectual establishment," the Arsenal points out that *E-Flat* is "one of the few films by Ghatak to grant its protagonists a happy ending." *Subarnarekha* (1965) completes the *Partition Trilogy* begun with *The Cloud-Capped Star* and *E-Flat*. In 2010, Kevin B. Lee found that the decade-spanning family drama "feels perpetually jostled, mirroring its characters sense of displacement and desperation to resettle themselves both physically and emotionally."

*A River Called Titas*, one of the first features to be made in Bangladesh following the country's war for independence, tracks a series of tragedies that befall Basanti (Rosy Samad) after she marries a fisherman. "What makes this epic movie so memorable is Ghatak's poetic feeling for landscapes and the ordinary villagers whose lives play out against its cyclical, natural rhythms," wrote Michael Smith in 2014. Ghatak's final film, *Reason*,

*Debate and a Tale* (1977), was shot in 1974 but went unreleased until after his death. “The story begins with an alcoholic (me), whose family is just leaving him,” he wrote. “When they’re gone, a young girl arrives in a torn sari, a symbol for Bangladesh. The man, the girl, and a younger man wander through Bengal, through its industrial zones, through its small cities, its wooded regions, and through Calcutta, until they come across several Naxalites in a forest. Towards the end, a confrontation ensues between the Naxalites and the run-down, alcoholic intellectual, in whom they for at least a brief moment recognize a kindred spirit, a non-conformist.”

## ***The Cloud-Capped Star: A Cry for Life***

**Ira Bhaskar • Sept. 10, 2019**

Article sourced from Criterion: <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/6580-the-cloud-capped-star-a-cry-for-life>

At a critical moment toward the end of *The Cloud-Capped Star*, the father of the central character, Neeta, disconsolately asks his East Bengali family, now refugees in South Kolkata, “Can you repair my broken heart and mind?” These words sound the central note of the film: the irreparable despair and psychological unhinging that the 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent into the nations of India and Pakistan brought about in the people who experienced it, with its violence, deaths, and dislocations along with the official silence around these consequences. In their drive toward nation building, the governments of the new countries did not want to address the traumatic impact of the Partition. Writers, poets, painters, and a few filmmakers did respond in the aftermath to the shattering of lives, cultures, and communities, but the work that was produced could not mitigate the larger silence. It is in this context that Ritwik Ghatak’s work is significant: he was responding to the destruction of the cultural unity of his beloved homeland, Bengal, whose political, economic, and psychological problems he attributed to the Partition. *The Cloud-Capped Star* (1960) is the second film of what I call Ghatak’s Partition Quartet, which also includes *Nagarik* (1952), *E-Flat* (1961), and *Subarnarekha* (completed in 1962). These four films address directly the lifeworlds of Bengali refugees, but the Partition was the defining experience of Ghatak’s life, and he evokes it in a variety of ways throughout his fictional cinema.

Ghatak stands alongside Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen as an art filmmaker who was committed to depicting the realities of contemporary Bengali and Indian life. Unlike Ray and Sen, however, Ghatak also drew on Indian mythology and melodramatic traditions from the country’s theater and cinema, as well as the Jungian concept of the archetype. The modernist montage aesthetics of Sergei Eisenstein and the work of the great Bengali poet, author, artist, and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore were other important sources of inspiration for him. And yet, for all these influences, the resonant, overtonal, allusive form that Ghatak developed was uniquely his, and one in which myth mediates history and the everyday. Unlike the realism of Ray and Sen, it is expressionism that shapes Ghatak’s articulation of emotion, even as the musicality of melodrama structures his narratives and plumbs the depths of individual, social, and cultural experience.

*The Cloud-Capped Star* was Ghatak’s fourth completed feature, and it is the one he is best known for, as well as the only one that enjoyed commercial success. Its critical history is checkered, as is typical of responses to the filmmaker, who was initially rejected as being too melodramatic and later upheld as an undiscovered master of world cinema. Ghatak considered Eisenstein to be his guru, and that influence is evident in this film’s mise-

en-scène—particularly in its placement of actors and objects in the frame and its frequent use of low angles, high-contrast expressionist lighting, and fluid camera movements. Ghatak also regularly invoked Eisenstein in his contrapuntal use of sound. In his typically dense and complex soundtrack for *The Cloud-Capped Star*, he amplifies diegetic and nondiegetic sounds to foreground his characters’ emotional states. And Ghatak uses different forms of Indian music—classical, folk, popular—to further articulate the film’s soundscape, to express the characters’ interiority, and to evoke the mythological roots of their cultural worldview. This layering is indicative of the director’s distinctive way of spanning the worlds of the everyday-social and the mythic-cultural.

*“While the bare bones of the film’s narrative could be the story of any refugee family struggling to resettle under harsh circumstances, it is Ghatak’s cinematic vision that makes this film unique.”*



In *The Cloud-Capped Star*’s refugee colony, Hindu exiles from what used to be East Bengal and became East Pakistan have made thatched shelters for themselves and are attempting to rebuild their lives. At the center of this narrative—which Ghatak adapted from a short story, “Chenamukh” (The commoner), by Shaktipada Rajguru—is Neeta (Supriya Choudhury), who initially helps to support her family by giving lessons to children, even while attending university classes herself, but eventually becomes the sole provider for her parents and three siblings after a series of adversities beset them. While the bare bones of the film’s narrative could be the story of any refugee family struggling to resettle under harsh circumstances, it is Ghatak’s cinematic vision that makes this film unique. After the credit sequence, which introduces various leitmotifs, both visual and aural—shimmering stars amid rippling water; stringed, percussive, and vocal rhythms and notes—the film opens on the wide-angle image of a huge tree, from below which a figure emerges, walking slowly to the sound of a male

singing voice, practicing scales. Seconds before that shot gives way to a close-up of Neeta in profile, smiling indulgently at her older brother, Shankar (Anil Chatterjee), the sound of a train is introduced; when we finally do see her face, we also see a train rushing past along the horizon in the distant background, while Shankar is seated by a pond in the middle distance. In these opening shots, Ghatak introduces two dominant images associated with Neeta throughout the film—the tree and water, both signifiers of fertility and creation in Hindu symbology. Furthermore, the close-up of Neeta introduces the force of history in the form of the train, an evocative image of the Partition in the literature and cinema of the time.

The first third of the film traces the family's daily struggles with various indignities and difficulties, including an accident that disables the father (Bijon Bhattacharya); the barbs aimed at Shankar for not taking on the responsibilities of the family as the eldest son; the insecurities of the mother (Gita Dey) about Neeta's relationship with her beau, Sanat (Niranjan Ray); and, most poignantly, Neeta's attempts to support everyone. The section culminates in a Baul (wandering minstrel) song that comments on the situation by expressing in the tradition of mystical poetry the desire to transcend the sufferings of life. The sequence begins as the song fades in during a conversation between Shankar and the local grocer, who accuses the family of living off Neeta. A cut finds the camera tracking in lyrically toward a group of Bauls, seated and performing on their traditional stringed instruments. The central singer seems lost in an interior world as he sings, "I don't know your name, O boatman / Who should I call for? / Who will row me across?" The song continues over the scenes that follow, including one in which Neeta informs her parents that her younger brother, Montu (Dwij Bhawal), has taken up a job in a factory. This disturbs the father, who also does not seem to know who is going to row him across to the other side and free him from his suffering.

The mother's predicament is similar. The greatest threat she sees to her family seems to be Neeta's relationship with Sanat; when Sanat visits Neeta, the sound of rice boiling on the stove and the sight of steam rising upward and enveloping the mother's face powerfully evoke her anxieties about her family's basic survival. A similar expressionistic use of sound occurs later: spices loudly splutter as they're thrown into boiling oil during the scene in which the mother tacitly approves of the attempts of her younger daughter, Geeta (Gita Ghatak), to attract Sanat. Neeta, her mother, and her sister can be seen as representing preservation, destruction, and sensuality, respectively—what filmmaker Kumar Shahani has identified as the three "traditional aspects of feminine power" and fertility in the Indian tradition, as depicted by the Tantric symbol of the inverted triangle.

In this second section, it is Shankar's and Neeta's humiliations that drive the narrative. Shankar's response to the insults for not earning his keep is to withdraw further into his music. Neeta, meanwhile, hears of Sanat giving up his research and taking a job, and, when she visits his new apartment, realizes that there is a woman in his inner room. She leaves without a word, and Ghatak shoots her from a low angle as she descends the stairs, while the soundtrack explodes with the sound of a whiplash, evoking the psychological laceration that this discovery causes. Her descent continues into a close-up, with her eyes brimming and gaze turned upward, a hand clutching her throat in a gesture of claustrophobia. She closes her eyes and turns her head to her right while Ghatak dissolves from her grieving face to a shot of the center of her family's courtyard, invoking the central archetype of this film: Durga, the Mother Goddess.

One of the main images associated with Neeta is that of the courtyard, the place where all the members of her family make their demands on her. In the film, the courtyard is like a *bavan kund*, the traditional ritualistic

receptacle into which human desires and aspirations are consigned as offerings to the gods. A popular story about Durga is that she was born from the sacrificial fire in the form of Jagadhatri, the goddess who sustains the universe, the provider and benefactress of the world. Neeta shares her birthday with the Goddess, provides for the family, gives everything up for them, and is finally given up by them. After the marriage of Geeta and Sanat and the discovery of Neeta's tuberculosis, Neeta, who earlier was frequently framed in the middle of the courtyard, is seen only on its peripheries, marginalized, having removed herself from the center of the household.

Neeta's defeat and sacrifice at the hands of her family are articulated in another stunning sequence in which she requests that Shankar teach her a song by Tagore. As the siblings sing together, the camera glides toward them, away, and then back, following the rhythms of the music and the significance of the lyrics: "The night the storm blew open my doors / Little did I know that you would come into my home . . . / Could I have known that the storm was the pennant of your triumph?" As the song seems to have concluded, Neeta suddenly sings the first line again, in a tight, low-angle close-up that echoes that earlier shot on Sanat's staircase, big, teary eyes turned upward, gazing off-screen as the sound of the whiplash explodes once again on the soundtrack, followed by silence. Once more her hand moves to clutch her throat, before she breaks down, sobbing inconsolably.

*"Neeta's cry for life resonates through the innards of a culture that denies women fullness of being."*



The last third of the film has Neeta battling adversities alone—including car-ing for Montu, who has suffered an accident—after Shankar leaves for Mumbai. Structuring this section is a melancholic farewell song sung at the end of Bengal's annual Durga festival to lament the departure of the Goddess (also known as Uma) after her ten-day visit to her maternal home when she returns to her husband, Shiva, in the mountains. In *The Cloud-Capped Star*, this song ironically evokes Neeta's slow destruction. An instrumental version of it initially plays over the scene after the first whiplash sequence, when, preparing for Geeta's marriage, their mother asks

Neeta for her jewelry for her sister. It goes on to underscore the scene in which Neeta's father tells her that, in place of the barbaric custom of young daughters being married off to old men, now they are educated and exploited. And finally, the sung version plays as the sick Neeta coughs up blood and becomes aware of her impending doom: "Come to me, my daughter Uma . . . / Let me bid you fare-well, my daughter / You leave my home desolate / How can I endure your departure?" The song recurs in scenes that follow, including after Neeta's death, when only her brother Shankar mourns her.

The fact that music is central to Ghatak's allusive form is also clear from his use of the raga "Hamsadhvani," which is what Shankar practices throughout the film. The song is an invocation to the Mother Goddess in which the singer praises her and asks her to not tarry anymore but to bless him with music and virtue. On Shankar's triumphant return from Mumbai as a successful musician, he performs the climax of the song with great gusto. In complete contrast to the Uma song, this one is a paean to the Goddess: "Your perfumed body, your forehead marked with sandal paste / Doe-eyed, with sweeping lashes / May your wisdom be for your people . . ."

What follows this performance is, of course, highly ironic. Shankar learns of Neeta's illness and leaves to arrange for her to be admitted to a sanatorium in Shillong. Ghatak indicates both her arrival and her love and longing for the mountains with his signature circular pans over this landscape. Months later, Shankar visits her and finds her melancholic as she tears up an old love letter from Sanat in which he called her a "cloud-capped star." Shankar speaks of home: their new two-story house, Geeta's little son. Neeta breaks out suddenly in an explosive cry: "Dada, I wanted to live; I want to live; say to me that I will live . . ." The hills seem to reverberate with this cry as her sobs echo on the soundtrack and Ghatak's camera once again pans in circles around the indifferent landscape of Lord Shiva. Neeta's cry for life resonates through the innards of a culture that denies women fullness of being. Ghatak is powerfully critiquing a Bengali culture that venerates the Goddess but is so cruel to its women. On his return from the hills, when the grocer asks after his sister, Shankar can only break down as he sees another woman walking the same path that his sister used to travel, while the soundtrack echoes with the mournful tones of the Uma song, which continue as the screen fades to black. The archetype is thus perpetuated in the image of the toiling woman. Melodrama has opened up a space through and beyond emotion to confront the horrifying cultural truth of this world.

Hardly recognized in his lifetime, obsessed with the impossible dream of a unified Bengal while witnessing its disintegration on every level, Ghatak used his cinematic art to respond to the landscape of ruin around him. His was an epic, civilizational vision that placed hope for regeneration in the future, represented in *The Cloud-Capped Star*, as in other films of his, by the energy and life of a new child. However, what is likely to resonate most poignantly in the memory of the viewer long after this film has ended is Neeta's agonized cry for life against the apathy of her world, and the song of mourning that pays tribute to her.



## Filmography as Director

- **Ramkinkar** (1975) documentary short
- **Reason, Debate and a Story** (1974)
- **A River Called Titas** (1973)
- **Durbar Gati Padma** (1971) short
- **Where the Padma Flows** (1971)  
documentary short
- **Amar Lenin** (1970) documentary short
- **Purular Chhou Nritya** (1970)  
documentary
- **Yeh Kyun?** (1970) documentary short
- **Scientists of Tomorrow** (1967) short
- **Fear** (1965) short
- **Rendezvous** (1965) documentary short
- **Subarnarekha** (1965)
- **Ustad Alauddin Khan** (1963)  
documentary short
- **Scissors** (1962) short
- **E-Flat** (1961)
- **The Cloud-Capped Star** (1960)
- **Kato Ajanare** (1959)
- **Bari Theke Paliye** (1958)
- **Pathetic Fallacy** (1958)
- **Adivasiyon Ka Jeevan Srot** (1955)  
documentary
- **Bihar Ke Darshaniya** (1955)
- **Oraon** (1955) documentary
- **Naramedh Yagna** (1954)
- **Nagarik** (1952)
- **Bedeni** (1951)