

In Search of a Feminist Voice in Selected Films of Ritwik Ghatak

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a critical examination of the feminine voice in the films of Ritwik Ghatak, with a specific focus on Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960), Komal Gandhar (1961), and Subarnarekha (1965), collectively known as Ghatak's Partition Trilogy. While Ghatak is widely regarded for foregrounding the Partition of Bengal and the plight of refugees, this study shifts the lens to explore how female subjectivity is constructed, silenced, or symbolically represented within his cinematic universe.

Drawing from feminist film theory and discourse analysis, particularly the frameworks developed by Laura Mulvey and Jennifer Coates, the research investigates the subtle deliveries and interruptions of the feminine voice in the narrative, visual, and sonic structure of Ghatak's films. It explores how characters such as Nita, Anusuya, and Sita navigate gendered spaces, express emotional labor, and encounter structural constraints shaped by patriarchy, nationalism, and social constructs.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach, conducting close textual readings of scenes to trace feminine agency through voice, silence, gesture, dialogue, and metaphor. The analysis identifies recurring patterns of moral objectification, sacrificial narrative arcs, and representations, alongside moments of resistance and disagreements that render the feminine voice temporarily visible.

The findings suggest that Ghatak's cinema, though not explicitly feminist, operates within a liminal space where female subjectivity is utilized according to its social constructs. His women are not merely victims of Partition but become symbolic repositories of collective trauma, cultural continuity, and existential longing. This paper contributes to Indian feminist film discourse by reassessing Ghatak's works through a gendered lens, emphasizing the urgency of listening to women's silences within national and cinematic narratives.

Keywords: Ritwik Ghatak, Feminist Film Theory, Partition Cinema, Female Subjectivity, Gender and Discourse

Introduction

Ritwik Ghatak was not only a filmmaker but a chronicler of loss and upheaval, whose personal and political concerns became inseparable from his cinematic work. Deeply shaped by the Partition of Bengal

in 1947, Ghatak's films center on the lived realities of displaced people, especially the refugees of East Bengal. Born in Dhaka and later forced to move to Calcutta, Ghatak experienced first-hand the dislocation that would haunt his characters.

Ghatak started out his career in theatre, working with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), a group that believed in using art for social change. It was here that Ghatak first got involved in leftist politics. He believed in Marxist ideas — in equality, justice, and speaking up for the poor and oppressed. But he wasn't a party man. He didn't like dogma or strict ideologies. He was more interested in asking questions and telling truths. He once said, "I am not a Marxist. I am a Marxist in the making." That line says a lot about him — always thinking, never fully settling, always searching for what was right and honest.

By the early 1950s, Ghatak moved from theatre to cinema. He believed that films could reach more people, especially those who didn't go to plays or read books. He saw cinema as a powerful tool not just to entertain, but to make people feel, think, and remember. He didn't make films for money. Most of his films did not do well commercially. But he didn't care. He was making films because he had something to say and because he couldn't stay silent. In this cinematic landscape of his career, the presence of women is especially heartrending. Ghatak's women do not simply exist in the margins; they are central, emotionally resonant figures who often bear the weight of familial survival and cultural continuity. However, these women are frequently denied autonomy or space to articulate their desires. Their voices both literal and metaphorical are shaped by silence, sacrifice, and endurance. Thus, Ghatak consistently foregrounds female characters in his films, it remains unclear whether his portrayal genuinely allows for a feminist voice or merely aestheticizes their suffering.

This research aims to explore the feminist potential of Ghatak's cinema. Specifically, it asks: Do Ghatak's films give space for women to express their agency and emotional complexity? Or are they simply symbolic representations of national trauma and collective memory? Drawing from discourse theory and feminist film criticism, the paper interrogates Ghatak's narrative strategies to uncover how the feminine voice is represented, mediated, or silenced within his films.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive textual analysis grounded in feminist film theory and gender discourse analysis. The goal is not only to explore the thematic presence of female characters in Ritwik Ghatak's cinema, but to understand how their voices—literal, symbolic, and structural—are shaped, marginalized, or erased through cinematic language. The methodology comprises a multi-layered framework incorporating film theory, feminist discourse, and formal cinematic elements.

1. Selection of Films: The research centers on three films by Ritwik Ghatak that constitute his informal "Partition Trilogy": *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961), and *Subarnarekha* (1965). These films were selected for their unified thematic concern with the post-Partition refugee experience, their intense focus on female protagonists, and their interconnected political and emotional narratives. Each film features a central female character whose life reflects broader socio-political disintegration and cultural displacement.

2. Feminist Discourse Framework: The study applies the gender discourse framework of Jennifer Coates, which analyzes the linguistic behaviors and discourse positioning of women within patriarchal structures.

It observes how female characters' speech is framed, interrupted, or erased, and how emotional labor and silence function as gendered expectations. Additionally, Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" informs the visual analysis of how women are constructed in the films—whether they are subjects with agency or objects within the narrative.

3. Modes of Analysis:

- **Textual Analysis:** Focused close reading of dialogues, character interactions, and plot progression to locate how female agency is introduced, contained, or removed. This includes not only the words spoken by female characters but the emotional tone, pauses, and ruptures that characterize their speech.
- **Visual Analysis:** Examination of mise-en-scène, cinematographic framing, use of lighting, spatial positioning, and visual metaphors (e.g., thresholds, windows, shadows, trains, natural elements) that signify the inner worlds and social boundaries imposed on female characters.
- **Sound and Silence:** Investigation into Ghatak's expressive use of sound design, especially non-diegetic sounds (like screeches, ambient background, and symbolic silences) that act as surrogates for suppressed feminine expression. The relationship between voice, music, and moments of muteness are also analyzed to understand how aural space is granted or denied to female characters.
- **Narrative Structure and Subjectivity:** The study also assesses the narrative placement of women. Are they agents of change, victims, or symbolic figures within a larger patriarchal discourse? Who drives the story, and how are the women allowed or disallowed from shaping its direction?

4. **Thematic Intersectionality:** To enrich the analysis, the methodology includes considerations of intersecting themes—such as class, displacement, familial roles, cultural duty, and historical trauma—which mediate the feminist voice. For instance, how does Neeta's role as economic provider intersect with her gendered silence? How does Sita's social erasure as a mother outside the married state reflect larger societal taboos?

5. **Comparative Contextualization:** Finally, the analysis is supported by intertextual references to contemporary or preceding representations of women in Indian cinema, including IPTA-influenced works, social realist films, and later feminist interventions. Ghatak's portrayal of women is evaluated not in isolation but within the range of Indian cinematic history and feminist thought.

Through this multi-dimensional methodology, the research aims to uncover the deep structures through which Ghatak constructs and constrains the feminine voice, and to offer a critical reading that situates his work within the ongoing discourse on gender, voice, and representations.

Analysis of Selected Films

Why These Three Films Were Chosen

The selection of Meghe Dhaka Tara, Komal Gandhar, and Subarnarekha is deliberate and rooted in both thematic and cinematic continuity. These three films, often referred to as Ritwik Ghatak's unofficial "Partition Trilogy," serve as a focused lens through which his vision of social displacement, cultural fragmentation, and gendered suffering can be examined. Each film offers a different portrayal of the feminine experience under the weight of historical trauma and personal sacrifice.

These works are unified by several crucial features:

1. **Post-Partition Narrative Context:** All three films are deeply embedded in the socio-political aftermath of the 1947 Partition, which shaped Ghatak's cinematic worldview. Women in these narratives are not just characters but embodiments of cultural and familial breakdown.
2. **Central Female Characters:** Unlike many of his contemporaries, Ghatak places women at the emotional and moral center of these films. Neeta, Anusuya, and Sita are not peripheral to the story; they are the core around which the socio-political commentary unfolds.
3. **Symbolic and Emotional Depth:** Each of these films utilizes the female protagonist as a site of emotional resonance and cultural metaphor. Whether through Neeta's suppressed desire, Anusuya's ideological negotiation, or Sita's tragic erasure, the feminine voice is simultaneously centered and silenced—making these films especially fertile for feminist discourse analysis.
4. **Diverse Representations of Feminine Expression:** These three characters represent a range of experiences—from Neeta's quiet suffering to Anusuya's assertive involvement, and Sita's devastating fall into invisibility. Together, they provide a spectrum of how feminine agency and voice are constructed, negotiated, or denied.
5. **Autobiographical and Thematic Consistency:** These films were created during a particularly intense and reflective period of Ghatak's life. They are widely regarded as his most personal works, blending myth, realism, melodrama, and political critique. His own experience as a refugee and his ideological leanings permeate these narratives, adding further complexity to the portrayal of women.

Therefore, this trilogy not only represents the core of Ghatak's artistic expression but also provides a concentrated field for exploring the feminist voice in Indian parallel cinema. These three films, when examined together, offer a nuanced and layered understanding of how Ghatak engaged with questions of gender, identity, and cultural survival.

The Films of Ritwik Ghatak

1. Meghe Dhaka Tara

1.1 Film Description

Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud-Capped Star) is arguably Ghatak's most well-known and widely discussed film. Released in 1960, the film captures the plight of a refugee family in post-Partition Calcutta. It centers on Neeta, a self-sacrificing daughter who supports her entire family at the cost of her own dreams and desires. Ghatak uses melodrama as a mode of social critique, exploring dislocation, exploitation, and gender roles.

1.2 Plot and Storyline

The film follows Neeta, who bears the financial and emotional burden of her refugee family. Her father is injured, her brother aspires to be a singer, and her younger siblings are dependent on her. As Neeta sacrifices everything—including her health and her love life—for her family, she is ultimately discarded

and left to die in isolation. Her climactic outburst—"Dada, ami bachte chai"—is both a personal plea and a symbolic scream against societal injustice.

1.3 Film Analysis

- **Discourse Analysis** (Jennifer Coates): Neeta's conversations are marked by deference, interruptions, and compliance. Her voice is structured around emotional labor and politeness, typical of female discourse under patriarchal norms.
- **Visual Analysis:** Ghatak's mise-en-scène—decaying walls, empty fields, shadowy interiors—mirrors Neeta's inner desolation. Her isolation is visually emphasized through framing and the use of negative space.
- **Sound and Silence:** The recurring sonic motif of non-diegetic screeches and dissonant tones reflects Neeta's internal turmoil. Her final scream is amplified, standing in contrast to her otherwise subdued voice.
- **Narrative Structure:** Neeta is central but not powerful. Her arc ends not in liberation but in sacrifice.
- **Feminist Reading:** Neeta is a tragic heroine, glorified for her strength yet denied individuality. Her suppression represents the broader silencing of women within refugee families and national narratives.

Neeta, the central character, is a displaced woman who shoulders her family's financial and emotional burdens. Her voice is calm, composed, and subdued—until the iconic outburst, "Dada, ami bachte chai," breaks through years of repression.

- **Discourse Analysis:** Neeta's speech is marked by politeness and emotional restraint. She is frequently interrupted or ignored, reflecting societal expectations of female silence and self-sacrifice. According to Coates' model, her voice conforms to the emotional labor expected from women.
- **Visual Metaphors:** Ghatak uses stark, desolate imagery—solitary trees, barren landscapes to mirror Neeta's isolation. Her domestic space is claustrophobic, denying her room for self-expression.
- **Narrative Agency:** Though the story revolves around Neeta, she exercises no control over its progression. Her decisions are consistently overruled, and her desires are subsumed by duty.
- **Feminist Reading:** Neeta is morally objectified—glorified for her endurance but denied subjectivity. Her final scream is not liberation but a tragic revelation of her silence.

2 Komal Gandhar

2.1 Film Description

Komal Gandhar (E-Flat) is Ghatak's 1961 film about a progressive theater group grappling with ideological divisions and personal relationships. It is both a love story and a political commentary,

intertwining romance and revolutionary ideals. The film's musical and theatrical motifs form the aesthetic and symbolic framework for its narrative.

2.2 Plot and Storyline

Set within a theater troupe that has split into factions, the story centers on Anusuya, a committed and expressive woman navigating political commitments and romantic tension with her colleague Bhriгу. As ideological debates and performance rehearsals unfold, Anusuya attempts to find her place both emotionally and ideologically.

2.3 Film Analysis

- **Discourse Analysis:** Anusuya is more assertive than Neeta but remains within male-dominated conversations. Her speech is more dialogic but often overshadowed.
- **Visual and Spatial Analysis:** The stage represents duality—liberation through expression and limitation through role-play. Anusuya is often framed in rehearsal spaces, symbolizing her confined autonomy.
- **Soundscape and Silence:** Her voice carries ideological clarity, yet her emotional voice is subdued. Background music often underscores her suppressed romantic desires.
- **Narrative Role:** She is a key participant in the group's journey but not a primary driver of the plot's resolution.
- **Feminist Reading:** Anusuya illustrates a liminal space between speech and silence, awareness and submission. She represents women who are visible yet marginal in revolutionary spaces.

Anusuya, a politically conscious member of a theater group, presents a more articulate female figure. Her voice is allowed presence, but her role remains secondary to male-driven ideological struggles.

- **Voice and Articulation:** Anusuya speaks with clarity and ideological purpose. However, her ideas are often mediated or redirected by male counterparts, especially Bhriгу.
- **Stage as Symbol:** The theatrical space within the film becomes a site for constrained expression—she is visible and vocal, but within predefined scripts.
- **Narrative Boundaries:** Anusuya influences the group's dynamics, yet her own aspirations are rarely foregrounded. She is allowed to speak, but not to lead.
- **Feminist Reading:** Anusuya represents a transitional figure—a woman aware of her agency but restricted by ideological and relational confines.

3 Subarnarekha

3.1 Film Description

Subarnarekha (The Golden Line), made in 1965, is Ghatak's most tragic and allegorical narrative. The film deals with themes of caste, morality, displacement, and cultural decay. It follows the life of Sita, whose trajectory embodies loss, marginalization, and silence.

3.2 Plot and Storyline

Sita is adopted and raised by her brother Ishwar after their displacement. As she grows, she falls in love with a lower-caste man, which Ishwar opposes. After a series of tragic events—including her partner's death and her life as a single mother—Sita ends up in a brothel. She unknowingly meets her brother again, and the film ends in unredeemed sorrow and death.

3.3 Film Analysis

- **Discourse and Silence:** Sita's voice diminishes progressively. As her social value declines, her linguistic and narrative presence fades.
- **Visual and Symbolic Reading:** Railway tracks, broken bridges, and derelict buildings signify her severed ties with stability and identity.
- **Soundscape:** The absence of dialogue in crucial scenes intensifies her alienation. Ambient silence becomes a substitute for voice.
- **Narrative Arc:** Sita transitions from a dependent child to a socially erased figure. Her death seals her dispossession.
- **Feminist Reading:** Sita's arc is a direct critique of moral puritanism and patriarchal rejection. Her fate challenges the glorification of chastity and honor, exposing systemic violence against women who defy convention.

Sita's trajectory—from sister to single mother to marginalized outcast—represents the most painful erasure of feminine voice in Ghatak's oeuvre.

- **Silencing and Erasure:** Sita is gradually stripped of dialogue. Her final appearance, marked by silence and death, speaks volumes about the denial of redemption for women who transgress societal norms.
- **Visual Composition:** Empty railway stations, crumbling homes, and desolate landscapes mirror her complete social and emotional dislocation.
- **Narrative Dispossession:** Sita becomes invisible to the plot's moral core. Her tragedy is rendered in silence, with no justice or acknowledgment.
- **Feminist Reading:** Sita is not a failed character—she is failed by the system. Her fate critiques the disposability of women once they no longer conform to patriarchal ideals.

Discussion

Ghatak's cinematic women, though emotionally deep and narratively central, are frequently denied expressive autonomy. Across the selected films, a striking pattern emerges: female characters are positioned as emotional anchors, yet are rarely afforded full subjectivity or control over their destinies. This is particularly evident in the narrative positioning and structural silencing of Neeta, Anusuya, and Sita. Each of these women occupies a symbolic center in the film but is constrained by familial obligation, ideological repression, or societal disapproval.

What makes Ghatak's films particularly compelling for feminist analysis is the tension between voice and silence. His women speak through their suffering, through looks, gestures, silences, and symbolic acts—but their vocal articulations are often interrupted, ignored, or punished. Neeta's late scream for life in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* echoes the years of unacknowledged labor and desire. Anusuya in *Komal Gandhar* speaks with intellect and commitment, yet is absorbed into male-led political confusion. Sita in *Subarnarekha* is rendered nearly mute her final silence a devastating commentary on cultural and moral hypocrisy.

The discussion also underscores the importance of form in Ghatak's expression of gender. His use of melodrama, myth, and musical ideas does not merely heighten emotion; it dramatizes the conflict between interior worlds and societal constraints. By placing women within a cinematic environment that mirrors their psychological turmoil through storm sounds, broken homes, or musical dissonance, Ghatak expresses their repression.

Moreover, Ghatak's rejection of commercial narrative often denying his female characters a resolution or redemption can be seen as both a limitation and a critique. He resists offering comforting solutions, instead confronting viewers with the ongoing crisis of gendered silencing in a fractured society. This open-endedness encourages the audience to reflect on their complicity in systems that sustain inequality.

Ghatak's films, therefore, operate within a paradox: while they elevate women as symbols of endurance and culture, they also reveal the cost of such elevation—erasure of individuality, voice, and desire. The tension between visibility and voicelessness becomes the very space in which feminist interpretation must intervene.

Neeta is silenced by familial obligation; Anusuya speaks but cannot transform; Sita disappears without closure. These patterns suggest that while Ghatak identifies deeply with feminine suffering, his cinematic structures do not fully empower female subjectivity.

Nevertheless, there exists in Ghatak's work a powerful critique of patriarchal oppression. His films lay bare the emotional labor, moral idealization, and social abandonment faced by women. They invite feminist reinterpretation, not by asserting liberation, but by portraying the urgent need for it.

Conclusion

Ritwik Ghatak's cinema does not offer simplistic feminist affirmations, but rather a complex and often contradictory portrayal of women shaped by personal loss, historical trauma, and societal expectation. His female characters—Neeta, Anusuya, and Sita are presented with emotional gravity and cultural centrality, yet they remain bound by structures that limit their agency and autonomy.

Through this exploration, it becomes evident that Ghatak's films articulate a form of proto-feminist critique. He does not provide women with clear paths for liberation, but he makes their absence felt with extraordinary power. In doing so, Ghatak dramatizes not only the silence of women but also the violence of that silence. His films draw attention to how patriarchal systems exist on the emotional labor and moral sacrifice of women while denying them narrative ownership.

The application of Jennifer Coates' discourse framework and Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze provides a deeper lens into these portrayals. The analysis reveals that Ghatak's cinema functions as a site

of both repression and revelation. It critiques dominant gender roles and points toward the possibility of resistance—even when such resistance is articulated through breakdown, absence, or death.

In conclusion, Ghatak's films are invaluable to feminist discourse in Indian cinema. They expose the limits of cultural idealization, challenge the moral frameworks imposed on women, and make visible the inner lives of characters who are otherwise culturally muted. While his work stops short of offering liberatory outcomes, it invites contemporary viewers and scholars to continue the conversation, listening for the feminist voices hidden in silence, and recognizing the stories that were never fully told.

By examining Ghatak's Partition Trilogy through feminist and discourse lenses, this paper reveals the complex interplay between voice and voicelessness, presence and absence, agency and constraint. It concludes that while Ghatak may not provide a fully articulated feminist cinema, his films cry out for feminist interpretation, urging us to hear what his heroines were never allowed to say.

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