

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.12426664

PARAMBULATING THE CITY OF SIN: KOLKATA IN THE FILMS OF RITWIK GHATAK

Hindol Palit^{1*}

¹West Bengal State University, SACT I, Department of English, Barrackpore Rastraguru Surendranath College

Received: 12/12/2025

Accepted: 09/02/2026

Corresponding Author: Hindol Palit

(hindolpalit3@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the representation of Calcutta in the films of Ritwik Ghatak as a dialectical space shaped by historical trauma, displacement, and modern urban crisis. Drawing upon the poetic evocation of the city in Nabarun Bhattacharya's "Night Circus," the study situates Ghatak's cinematic vision within a broader cultural and philosophical framework that foregrounds fragmentation, alienation, and ethical rupture. The paper argues that Ghatak's Calcutta is not merely a geographical entity but an epistemological and affective terrain where the contradictions of postcolonial modernity are rendered visible. Through close readings of *Nagarik* (1952), *Bari Theke Paliye* (1958), *Subarnarekha* (1965), and *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* (1974), the analysis demonstrates how Ghatak constructs the city as a site of class struggle, existential disintegration, and moral collapse. Employing a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that draws on Bertolt Brecht's theory of estrangement, Antonio Gramsci's concept of the intellectual, and Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny, the paper explores how cinematic form itself becomes a means of critical intervention. The study further argues that Ghatak's use of sound, montage, and disrupted visuality produces a mode of spectatorship that resists passive consumption and instead demands ethical engagement. Ultimately, the paper positions Ghatak's Calcutta as a space of unresolved tension—simultaneously hellish and generative—where ruin coexists with the possibility of resistance. By situating his work within both modernist and postcolonial discourses, the paper highlights the enduring relevance of Ghatak's cinema in understanding the complexities of urban experience in the Global South.*

KEYWORDS: Urban Modernity; Partition Trauma; Postcolonial City; Marxist Film Theory; Brechtian Estrangement; The Uncanny; Intellectual Crisis; Naxalite Movement; Bengali Cinema; Urban Alienation; Dialectics; Cinematic Space; Subaltern Experience

1 MY CITY

The feathers of kites fall – fall incessantly;
 A child is flying
 Across the roofs of houses.
 Carrying away so many beautiful girls,
 Where does the river of streets lead them?
 The child still flies, still hovers;
 In the smoke of chimneys, the kite's eye flutters in
 distress.
 Bearing the girls along,
 Where will the river carry them?
 Evening descends here;
 The planets grow dim in smoke,
 Burning faint and ashen
 Like the clandestine lights of the street.
 Those whose blood contains a metallic hardness
 Have seized my city;
 The poor have all withdrawn into hiding.
 (Nabarun Bhattacharya)

The Calcutta evoked in –dense, suffocating, and estranged – finds a compelling cinematic analogue in the films of Ritwik Ghatak. The poem's imagery of falling kites, abducted bodies, and metallic violence does not merely describe an urban landscape; it constructs a metaphysical topography of alienation, where the city appears as both lived space and symbolic abyss. Ghatak's cinema extends this poetic vision into a visual and auditory language that refuses reconciliation. His Calcutta is not simply a city in crisis; it is a historical wound, a site where memory, displacement, and modernity intersect in profoundly destabilizing ways.

Ghatak's engagement with the city is fundamentally anti-romantic. Unlike nationalist or developmentalist narratives that celebrate the postcolonial metropolis as a site of progress, his films foreground contradiction, rupture, and dispossession. The city becomes what may be termed an epistemological problem—a space that cannot be fully known or represented without confronting its internal violence. In this sense, Ghatak's cinema aligns with a broader modernist impulse, yet it remains distinctly rooted in the traumatic aftermath of Partition, which reconfigures urban experience as one of exile and fragmentation.

To understand this cinematic project, it is useful to situate Ghatak within multiple theoretical frameworks. His work resonates strongly with the dramaturgical strategies of Bertolt Brecht, particularly the concept of *Verfremdungseffekt*, or estrangement. Ghatak repeatedly disrupts narrative continuity and visual coherence, preventing the spectator from identifying passively with the diegetic

world. Instead, the viewer is compelled to adopt a critical stance, recognizing the constructed nature of representation. At the same time, his films articulate a deeply Marxist critique of urban modernity, exposing the ways in which capitalist structures produce alienation, unemployment, and class violence.

Yet Ghatak's cinema cannot be reduced to Brechtian or Marxist paradigms alone. It also engages with psychoanalytic notions of trauma and the uncanny, as well as with postcolonial concerns of displacement and identity formation. The city, in his films, is never merely material; it is also psychic, symbolic, and historical.

2 URBAN CRISIS AND MASCULINE DISINTEGRATION IN NAGARIK

Nagarik (1952) occupies a foundational position in Ghatak's oeuvre, offering one of the earliest cinematic explorations of post-Independence urban despair. As Sanjay Mukhopadhyay observes, the film may be regarded as the first explicitly political film of the Indian subcontinent (Mukhopadhyay 45). This political dimension emerges not through overt ideological declaration but through the meticulous representation of everyday precarity.

The protagonist Ramu embodies the crisis of the lower-middle-class subject in a rapidly transforming urban economy. His repeated failures to secure employment are not merely personal setbacks; they signify the structural impossibility of stability within a system governed by scarcity and competition. The job interview, as a recurring motif, functions as a ritual of humiliation. It stages what may be described as a bureaucratic theatre, where hope is systematically produced only to be extinguished.

This process has profound implications for masculinity. In a society where male identity is closely tied to economic productivity, unemployment produces a crisis of selfhood. Ramu's inability to fulfill the role of provider leads to a gradual erosion of dignity, transforming him into a figure of quiet despair. Ghatak thus reveals how economic structures penetrate the intimate domain of identity, destabilizing not only livelihoods but subjectivities.

Sound design plays a crucial role in articulating this crisis. Ghatak constructs a layered sonic environment in which industrial noise, traffic, and fragmented dialogue merge into a dissonant auditory field. As he himself notes in *Chalachitra Manush Ebong Aro Kichu*, sound must not merely accompany the image but interrogate it (Ghatak 72). The intrusion of metallic noise into moments of silence disrupts emotional

continuity, producing a sense of unease that mirrors the instability of urban life.

The image of Ramu standing beneath the sign of “Aladdin’s Lamp” encapsulates the film’s ironic vision. The promise of magical transformation—central to the mythology of modern progress—is rendered absurd in the face of systemic inequality. Here, Ghatak exposes the ideological illusions of postcolonial modernity, revealing them as unattainable fantasies.

3 THE COLLAPSE OF UTOPIA AND THE CHILD’S GAZE IN *BARI THEKE PALIYE*

If *Nagarik* foregrounds the crisis of adulthood, *Bari Theke Paliye* (1958) reconfigures the city through the perspective of childhood. Kanchan’s journey to Calcutta is motivated by a utopian desire—a belief in the city as a space of opportunity and adventure. This initial vision aligns with the figure of the flâneur, whose wandering produces a subjective mapping of urban space.

However, Ghatak systematically dismantles this utopia. The city reveals itself as a site of hunger, exploitation, and degradation. Kanchan’s encounters with poverty expose what may be termed the biopolitical dimension of urban existence, where survival itself becomes precarious. Scenes of scavenging, in which humans compete with animals for food, collapse the boundaries between species, suggesting a profound dehumanization.

The figure of Haridas Master further complicates this vision. Once a symbol of education and moral authority, he is reduced to a state of abjection, embodying the erosion of social dignity. Through such characters, Ghatak demonstrates how the city systematically dismantles structures of meaning and value.

The assault on the waiting mother constitutes one of the film’s most disturbing moments. The crowd’s indifference transforms violence into spectacle, implicating not only the perpetrators but the entire social body. Ghatak’s use of close-up intensifies this effect, forcing the spectator into an uncomfortable proximity with suffering. This technique recalls the montage aesthetics of Sergei Eisenstein, yet it is deployed here not to inspire revolutionary fervor but to expose ethical collapse.

In contrast to Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, where suffering ultimately yields moral redemption, Ghatak offers no such resolution. Kanchan’s return home signifies not defeat but recognition—the loss of illusion and the acceptance of a fractured reality shaped by Partition and displacement.

4 THE UNCANNY, MYTH, AND ETHICAL RUPTURE IN *SUBARNAREKHA*

Subarnarekha (1965) represents the most intense articulation of Ghatak’s tragic vision. Here, the city becomes a space of moral and psychological devastation, where familial bonds are eroded by economic necessity and historical trauma.

The film’s most shocking moment—the encounter between a woman forced into prostitution and her brother—invokes what Sigmund Freud terms the “uncanny” (Freud 124). The familiar is rendered strange, producing a sense of horror that destabilizes the very foundations of identity. This moment is not merely sensational; it functions as a symbolic condensation of social breakdown, where the boundaries between kinship, morality, and survival collapse.

Ghatak’s use of mythological references further complicates this narrative. By invoking archetypal structures, he situates contemporary suffering within a broader temporal framework, suggesting that the violence of modernity is both historically specific and universally resonant. The result is a temporal palimpsest, where past and present coexist in a state of unresolved tension.

The river Subarnarekha itself becomes a powerful symbol. Traditionally associated with fertility and continuity, it is transformed into a marker of loss and displacement. The dream of a stable home remains perpetually deferred, reinforcing the sense of exile that permeates Ghatak’s cinema.

Intellectual Crisis, Ideology, and Revolutionary Anxiety in *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*

In *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* (1974), Ghatak turns his attention to the role of the intellectual in a time of crisis. Nilkantha Bagchi emerges as a deeply ambivalent figure—simultaneously critical of and complicit in bourgeois culture. His alcoholism, cynicism, and disillusionment reflect a broader crisis within the intelligentsia.

Ghatak’s critique aligns with Antonio Gramsci’s distinction between “traditional” and “organic” intellectuals (Gramsci 12). The former remain detached from material realities, functioning as custodians of ideology, while the latter engage actively with social struggle. Nilkantha oscillates between these positions, embodying the contradictions of intellectual life in postcolonial India.

The film’s engagement with Naxalite politics introduces a further layer of complexity. Rather than romanticizing revolutionary violence, Ghatak presents it as both necessary and fraught with danger. The dialogue between Nilkantha and the

youth reflects a tension between theory and praxis, highlighting the difficulties of translating ideological commitment into effective action.

The act of pouring liquor over the camera lens serves as a powerful metaphor for obstructed vision. It suggests that perception itself is compromised, shaped by ideology, intoxication, and historical conditions. Yet this obstruction also opens the possibility of renewal—a reconfiguration of vision that acknowledges its own limitations.

5 CALCUTTA AS RUIN, MEMORY, AND DIALECTICAL SPACE

Across these films, Calcutta emerges as more than a physical setting; it becomes a dialectical space, defined by the tension between ruin and resistance. The city is simultaneously hellish and generative, a site of suffering that nevertheless contains the possibility of transformation.

This duality is central to Ghatak's cinematic philosophy. Rather than offering solutions, his films insist on the necessity of confrontation. They compel the spectator to engage with the contradictions of modernity, to recognize the persistence of violence within structures of progress.

In this sense, Ghatak's work may be understood as a form of critical realism, one that refuses both

escapism and despair. By foregrounding the material conditions of urban life while simultaneously invoking myth and memory, he constructs a cinematic language capable of addressing the complexities of postcolonial existence.

6 CONCLUSION

Vision, Ethics, and Fragmented Modernity

The recurring motif of obstructed vision culminates in a profound rethinking of perception. What appears initially as negation becomes a gesture of ethical purification—a recognition that seeing itself is a historically conditioned act.

This recalls T. S. Eliot's invocation—"Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata"—in *The Waste Land* (Eliot 433), where fragmentation gives way to an uncertain ethical imperative. Like Eliot, Ghatak confronts the ruins of modernity, yet he refuses to abandon the possibility of meaning.

Ultimately, Calcutta in Ghatak's cinema is neither merely a city of sin nor a site of redemption. It is a space of unresolved contradictions, where history, memory, and subjectivity intersect. In this space, vision becomes both a burden and a responsibility—a means of bearing witness to a world that resists comprehension yet demands engagement.

WORKS CITED

1. Bhattacharya, Nabarun. *Night Circus*.
2. Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land*. Faber and Faber, 1922.
3. Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McLintock, Penguin, 2003.
4. Ghatak, Ritwik Kumar. *Chalachitra Manush Ebong Aro Kichu*. Dey's Publishing, 1987.
5. ---. *Nijer Paaye Nijer Pothe*. Dey's Publishing, 1983.
6. Ghatak, Ritwik, director. *Nagarik*. 1952.
7. ---, director. *Bari Theke Paliye*. 1958.
8. ---, director. *Subarnarekha*. 1965.
9. ---, director. *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*. 1974.
10. Ghatak, Surama. *Ritwik*. Dey's Publishing, 1996.
11. Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971.
12. Mukhopadhyay, Sanjay. *Ritwiktantra*. Ananda Publishers, 2000.
13. Sengupta, Bandhan. *Ritwik Chalachitra Katha*. Ananda Publishers, 1993.