



The Cloud-Capped Star Meghe Dhaka Tara

Director: Ritwik Ghatak
Production Company: Chitrakalpa
Producer: Ritwik Ghatak
Screenplay: Ritwik Ghatak
Based on a story by: Shaktipada Rajguru
Director of Photography: Dinen Gupta
Editor: Ramesh Joshi
Art Director: Ravi Chattopadhyay
Music: Jyotirindra Moitra
Playback Singers: Debabrata Biswas, A. Kanan, Hemanga Biswas
Sound: Satyen Chattopadhyay
Cast:
Supriya Choudhury (*Nita*)
Anil Chatterjee (*Shankar*)
Bijon Bhattacharya (*the father*)
Guita De (*the mother*)
Gita Ghatak (*Guita*)
Dwiju Bhawal (*Montu, younger brother*)
Niranjan Roy (*Sanat*)
Ganesh Mukherjee
Ranen Roy Choudhury
Satindra Bhattacharya
India 1960©
127 mins
Digital (restoration)

Restored by the Criterion Collection in cooperation with The Film Foundation's World Cinema Project and the Cineteca di Bologna

Too Much: Melodrama on Film

The Cloud-Capped Star

The Cloud-Capped Star iconically represents the angst of the Partition and affective impacts of the resultant refugee crisis on women. In this film, Ritwik Ghatak politicised melodrama to embody the immensity of the loss incurred by such seismic events. It is the only film in his oeuvre that succeeded commercially and is deemed a classic of world cinema. In 2012, French critic Raymond Bellour ranked it among the ten films to have a lasting influence on him. The repercussions of rupture are depicted through the daily life of a refugee family and its sole breadwinner Nita, the protagonist. Unshackling the colonised from exclusive colonial references, Ghatak inscribed the absent subject into history by reclaiming their precolonial past through appropriation of Indian folk and mythological traditions. An avid reader of Jung, he developed the Great Mother archetype in the film as the foundation of the collective unconscious and as a shared spiritual motif among ancient cultures that fell prey to colonialism.

The film has three symbolic depictions of the archetype: the nurturer, the terrible, and the seductress. Nita was born on the day of *Jagaddhatri puja*, a Hindu Bengali celebration of the mother goddess whose name literally translates to 'the nurturer of the world'. The soundtrack is sprinkled with *agomani* songs, traditional Bengali folk music, presenting the timeless yearning of a mother for her estranged married daughter who cannot freely visit her parents. Carefully crafted symbolism takes the film beyond its spatiotemporal restrictions and endows a sense of universality. Nita's swansong, therefore, becomes the resounding defiance of all refugees across geopolitical and temporal limits: 'I wanted to live. I so love life, I shall live.' Using the three tenses, Ghatak links the past to the future, creating a continuum in the experiences of the colonised. The use of first person restored her from anonymity of victimhood and recovered her agency.

Sanghita Sen, II Cinema Ritrovato

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The director Ritwik Ghatak, who completed only eight features in his troubled career, has often been compared to his fellow Bengali Satyajit Ray, not always to Ray's advantage. In a famous 1966-67 *Sight and Sound* article, the critic and screenwriter Chidananda Das Gupta accused Ray of a fastidious shrinking from the violent and ugly aspects of Indian society, 'the Calcutta of the burning trams'. Ghatak's films, by contrast, shudder and burn with that same political fury that during the 60s convulsed his country. His life, too, was a series of agonised convulsions: erratic, abusive, hopelessly alcoholic, he alienated many of his colleagues and collaborators, aggravating the problems of funding or completing his films. The difference from the courteous, urbane Ray could hardly have been greater.

Yet watching *The Cloud-Capped Star*, generally reckoned the finest of Ghatak's films, many years after it was made, it's the correspondences as much as the contrasts with Ray's work that are striking. Their common experience and cultural heritage express themselves in shared images, such as the trains that crash shrieking across the flat landscape, bringing change and disruption. There are situations in common, too – the father's snobbish distaste in *Star* at his children taking menial jobs recalls that of the father (another ineffectual Brahmin) in Ray's *Mahanagar* (1963), when his daughter-in-law goes

Too Much: Melodrama on Film

Imitation of Life

Tue 2 Dec 18:00 (+ intro by Ellen E Jones, film & TV journalist and author); Sat 20 Dec 15:10

Beyond Camp: The Queer Life and Afterlife of the Hollywood Melodrama

Wed 3 Dec 18:15

Tea and Sympathy

Wed 3 Dec 20:25; Sun 7 Dec 18:15

Lola Montés

Sat 6 Dec 14:30; Wed 17 Dec 20:40

Way Down East

Sun 7 Dec 12:15; Tue 16 Dec 17:50 (+ intro by Pamela Hutchinson, film critic and historian)

New Women Xin nuxing

Tue 9 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by Cynthia Gu, Milk Tea Films); Sat 20 Dec 20:45

The Heiress

Wed 10 Dec 20:35; Sat 27 Dec 15:00

La otra The Other One

Fri 12 Dec 18:15 (+ intro by Camilla Baier, co-founder and curator of Invisible Women); Thu 18 Dec 20:40

The Silences of the Palace Samt El Koussour

Sat 13 Dec 20:30; Thu 18 Dec 18:00 (+ intro by Ifriqiya Cinema)

The Cloud-Capped Star Meghe Dhaka Tara

Sun 14 Dec 18:15; Sun 28 Dec 11:50

UK Premiere of Restoration: Beyond Oblivion

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Floating Clouds Ukiyomo

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Portrait of Jennie

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out to work. (Significantly, though, Ray's heroine thrives in her career, while both the son and daughter in Ghatak's film end up emotionally and physically destroyed.) And even Ghatak's expressionist use of sound is anticipated in Ray's very first film, *Pather Panchali* (1955), when Sarbojaya's howl of grief at her daughter's death is replaced by a keening shriek from the sitar.

But Ghatak, for whom moderation was never a virtue, takes such devices much further than Ray ever did. Few filmmakers, surely, can ever have made such wild, tormented use of sound: wailing, yelping, lamenting, shaking with rage, the soundtrack of *Star* becomes a character in its own right. Ghatak and his composer, Jyotirindra Moitra, deploy sound effects in a system of leitmotifs. A fierce dry crackling, like sticks in a fire, accompanies the mother's malicious gaze, and when Nita is confronted by Sanat's infidelity with her own sister, the crack of a whip slashes across the soundtrack. Nita's encroaching physical infirmity is expressed by a shrill high whistle chopped into by a Doppler effect, like the aural equivalent of a dislocated spine. And at times, especially in the early scenes, a rubble of sounds from unseen sources – songs, shouts, bleating goats, the undifferentiated noises of urban life – threatens to overwhelm the dialogue, stressing the racketeery proximity in which these refugee families have to live.

For the pain that rips its way through *Cloud-Capped Star* – and indeed through most of Ghatak's films – is above all the pain of exile. He himself, like his characters, was driven from his native East Bengal by the 1947 Partition, and never ceased to yearn for the remembered hills of his childhood. Nita cherishes a framed photograph of herself and her brother Shankar in their childhood home, and when he sends her to the sanatorium where she will die, he consoles her by promising she will 'see the hills at last'. As the scene changes to mist-swathed peaks and valleys, a table erupts on the soundtrack in a frenzy of joyous drumming. But it's too late; the photo has already been dropped and smashed, the idyll cannot be recaptured. The last sound we hear echoing round the hills is not the ecstatic table, but Nita's desolate final cry: 'I wanted to live!'

Nita, exploited and self-sacrificing, is the 'cloud-capped star' of the title, whose virtues go disregarded. For Ghatak, she stood for the nurturing goddess Durga, 'the archetype of all daughters and brides of Bengali households' (another point of contact with Ray, whose 1960 *Devi* also concerns a woman unwillingly cast as an avatar of Durga). But on a more mundane level she represents all the put-upon and downtrodden members of society whom Ghatak, staunchly leftwing, aimed to champion in his films. 'Those who suffer for others,' reflects Shankar, 'suffer for ever.'

At times the virulence of Ghatak's anger pulls him towards caricature, especially in the portrayal of the most selfish members of Nita's family. Yet he can never wholly withhold his sympathy; at one point even the termagant mother collapses into abject appeal, revealing the misery behind her harshness and begging Nita: 'I can't take the burden of this household any more. Set me free.' Ghatak himself was well aware that he often skirted dangerously close to melodrama. 'It is the right and privilege of the artist,' he asserted, 'to take the leap from the ridiculous to the sublime.' Such lapses, in any case, count for little in the face of so splintering an intensity of vision.

Philip Kemp, *Sight and Sound*, September 1997