

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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CLOUD-CAPPED STAR / MEGHE DHAKA TARA 1960

Ritwik Ghatak

(Bengali language)

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OVERVIEW

Cloud-Capped Star (Meghe Dhaka Tara) was adapted from a Bengali novel of the same name written by Shaktipada Rajguru. The film depicts the disintegration of a middle-class Bengali family who have been forced to leave their home in the east of Bengal during the Partition of 1948 and move to the west. A year earlier, when India became independent, Bengal was divided into East Pakistan (with a Muslim majority and part of Pakistan) and Bengal (with a Hindu majority and part of India). Many of the Hindus in the east uprooted their lives and moved west to Calcutta. The traumatic effects of that displacement are dramatised in the life of Nita, a young student who sacrifices her happiness, and eventually her life, for the welfare of her family. Her struggle is only made bearable by her faith in two men whom she loves. Her brother, Shankar, redeems her faith at the end, but she is betrayed by her fiancé, Sanat. While the family fortunes do improve at the end, she has contracted tuberculosis and dies in a sanatorium, unfulfilled and alone. It is a compelling and heart-wrenching film that tells its story with attention to small details, such as food prices, and to grand themes, such as love and sacrifice.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Although this film, like other Indian melodramas, centres on the themes of self-sacrifice and thwarted desires, it rises far above sentimentality by the quiet unfolding of the tragedy, the superb acting and the noir-ish cinematography. For Indian audiences at the time, however, the real significance of this now-classic film is the background. The drama plays out in a family living in a refugee camp housing people displaced by the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Approximately 2.5 million refugees settled in West Bengal, most of them in Calcutta, as in the film. Although there is not a single mention of Partition in the script, it is the constant presence behind the events.

The film is also semi-autobiographical in terms of its director. Ritwik Ghatak himself never accepted the political reality of Partition, which split Bengal into West Bengal (in India) and East Pakistan (in Pakistan). Indeed, he and his family were among those millions who were forced to cross over the hastily-drawn border and make a new home in Calcutta. In fact, he refused to use the term 'refugee problem', preferring instead to speak of 'a division of culture.' Whatever terminology is used, *The Cloud-Capped Star* shows the misery suffered by a family uprooted from their home.

STORY

The family The film begins as Nita returns from work and enters a refugee resettlement colony where her family now live. They are struggling. Her brother, Shankar, who wants to become a classical singer, cannot afford a haircut. Nita hasn't enough money to repair her sandals. The father, a somewhat dotty old gentlemen who makes a little money as a teacher, warns that more evictions from the camp are on the horizon. He is then reminded by some students that he is yet to pay the colony fee. Later, we meet Nita's ungrateful mother, who complains that Nita hasn't given her money for the month's shopping. Next to grumble is Nita's slightly younger sister, Gita, who complains of her torn saris. Then there is a younger brother, Montu, who is in college and says he needs new boots to play football. Thus, there are six adults in total: father, mother, two daughter and two sons. The father's salary is meagre; only Nita, who is the oldest and works as a tutor, keeps the family afloat. The day that Nita is paid they all gather around her like vultures. Shankar gets his haircut, Montu gets his boots and Gita her sari, while Nita's sandals go unattended.

Sanat Next, we learn about the other key character in the drama. Not through his appearance but through a love letter that he has written to Nita, which Shankar snatches from her and reads aloud. In his flowery Bengali language, closer to poetry than prose, Sanat has written that Nita is 'a cloud-capped star.' When Sanat does appear in person, he is known to the family as an old student of their father and is now a serious PhD student. Yet, even he needs money for a book.

Brief respite The father takes Nita for an outing, as they used to do before Partition, when they lived in the countryside in eastern Bengal. It is a rare moment of serene happiness in this otherwise bleak film.

Possible futures Sanat visits the family home, where he is welcomed with open arms and compared favourably with the idle Shankar. He and Nita talk about the future in coded terms. She has hopes of a married life when she will be kept as 'a wax doll safe inside a glass case.' Sanat is not so optimistic that he will get a job, which would allow them to marry.

Father's accident Things get worse when the father has an accident, removing even his small income from the family's finances. Now, Nita makes a further sacrifice and gives up her studies to take on more tuition work. Shankar, however, continues to practice his singing, including songs that ask 'for prosperity.'

Betrayal Gita, the younger sister, begins to flirt with Sanat, who is not impervious to her charms. Nita overhears their light-hearted talk and is hurt. She gives money to Shankar to buy new sandals, new clothes and get a haircut so that he can perform in a concert. When Nita finds out that Sanat has taken a high-paying job, which should allow them to marry, she tracks him down. But he is cold toward her, leaving her confused until her sister, Gita, announces that he is going to marry her. It is a double-barrelled betrayal.

Tuberculosis Shankar gets a small job and says he's leaving the house because he can't endure the family's suffering any longer. Montu, the other brother, is badly injured in a machine accident at his factory. When Nita visits him in hospital, the nurse notices that she herself is not well. She grows slowly worse, coughing and fainting, but there is good news about Shankar. He's made a big name for himself in Bombay as a singer.

A confession Sanat belatedly realises that he has married the wrong sister and asks for Nita's forgiveness. She only says that it is her penance, i.e., that she made a mistake by not protesting against her unfair suffering earlier.

Return to the hills In the end, Shankar returns to see his dying sister. Fulfilling his earlier promise to take her to the hills, where they once played as happy children, he accompanies her to a sanatorium there. The film concludes with one of the most memorable moments in Indian cinema when Nita cries out in defiance, 'Brother, I want to live.' Her cry reverberates through the beautiful landscape.

THEMES

Sacrifice The dominant and tragic theme of this film is the self-sacrifice made by Nita on behalf of her family. This would not be so noteworthy if Nita were not attractive, educated and middle-class. But her family, who were thriving before Partition, now live in straightened circumstances in a refugee camp. Nita should represent the 'modern woman' of an independent India, but instead she suffers as greatly as someone in a poor family a century before. This point is made by the father who says, 'In an earlier era, young Hindu girls were forced to marry dying old men and then burnt along with them [the custom of *sati*]. We called them barbarous. And now, we educate our daughters, allow them to earn, and then suck them dry. Where's the difference then?' And, as Nita herself explains, she suffers not for her sins but for her virtues. 'It is my penance,' she says to Sanat when she learns that he is to marry her sister. 'My punishment for being so ordinary, and not protesting against the unfairness of my suffering.' Self-sacrifice, like virtue, should be its own reward, but when the sacrifice is excessive, as in this story, it can be self-destructive. It can also be argued that Nita's stifling of her desires, her carrying the burden of her family, led to her illness and then her own death.

Betrayal Nita's suffering is all the more painful because her fiancé and her younger sister betray her trust. In fact, she is taken advantage of by everyone in her family, who depend on her selfless work as a tutor to pay for their needs. But the most hurtful actions are those of Sanat and Gita. He wants to marry Nita, but she will not consent while her family still rely on her. He cannot wait, so he quits his promising PhD studies, takes a job and marries Gita. This is the future that should by rights be Nita's, the comfortable and secure position of a wife in a middle-class marriage. She herself spells out exactly what she wants: 'Make me a wax doll and keep me in a glass cage.' But the financial situation of her family makes that impossible, with the result that the working modern woman is just as exploited as a woman 'trapped' in a traditional marriage. The betrayal of Nita's future represents in microcosm the squandered lives of millions of people who were uprooted and displaced by Partition in 1948.

CHARACTERS

Nita Nita is the protagonist of the film, whose story dominates the action. Nita is the long-suffering figure at the centre of this tragic tale as the exploited daughter, the taken-for-granted sister and the betrayed lover. Nita is self-sacrificing to the point of killing herself, and it can be argued that her fatal illness is, at least in part, due to her worry and stress. She is a kind and reflective person. At times, especially with Shankar, she shows a girlish, carefree side. Through most of the film, however, she is a hardworking woman upon whose income the family depends. It might be significant that she is born on an auspicious day in the Bengali Hindu calendar dedicated to the goddess Durga, who is also the ultimate mother.

Self-sacrificing Because the entire film is filled with her self-denying actions it is difficult to single one moment as the most significant. However, a good case can be made for the scene in which she and Sanat talk about their uncertain future. They are sitting on a bench in the early evening. Sanat turns his pensive face toward her and says, 'It's unbearable, your sacrifice. I will give up my studies and get a job. Then we can get married.' This is exactly what Nita wants, but she knows that her happiness comes last. 'No,' she says with a pained expression. 'How can we get married now? If I leave my family, what will happen to father, mother and the rest?' Sanat has no answer to this except to disparage her brother Shankar as lazy. 'Oh, no,' Nita says, this time with a little smile. 'He will turn out a great success. And you will, too. I pin my hopes on you two. Then, I'll find happiness.' But she does not find any happiness because the strain of her sacrifice takes its toll on her relationship with Sanat (who leaves her for her sister because she is willing to marry) and on her own health.

Hopeful The hope that Nita speaks of in the above quotation is what sustains her through various travails—lack of credit from shopkeepers, her mother's abuse, her father's accident and her younger brother's accident. Twice she gives that hope a specific shape. In the first instance, she and Sanat take a stroll beside a pond and talk about the future. Without actually saying that the family's financial burden prevents Nita from marrying, this is what they both understand. When Sanat asks her what she wants, she looks at him dreamingly and says, 'to be made into a wax doll and kept safe inside a glass case.' It is a powerful image, which in other contexts might be seen as a concession to the traditional role of a passive Indian wife restricted to the domestic sphere. Here, however, we understand how much Nita deserves to be protected from outside realities.

Sanat Sanat is a PhD student, who is in love with Nita but later betrays her. Sanat is a serious and studious young man. Working hard for a PhD, he is a mixture of idealism and pragmatism. That determination leads to torment when he jilts Nita and marries her sister. It is an inexcusable betrayal of Nita's love for him, and many critics have branded him a hypocrite, but his decision can also be seen in a more favourable light, as fulfilling his ideal of having a family life.

Studious Wearing round, rimless glasses, his hair mussed, Sanat is the epitome of a studious young man. Even in his first appearance, outside on the street, he is writing something in a notebook. A better illustration of his commitment to his studies occurs later, when he is in his small, cramped room. He is bent over a large book on a technical scientific topic, writing away furiously, when a man comes in to collect his rent. Shankar tries to explain that he doesn't have the money because he's too busy studying to make money. 'I've heard that one before,' the man says with a cynical grin. 'You'd better settle down and get a job.' Hearing this, Shankar raises his head from his book and looks at the man with scorn. 'You'll never understand that there's something called an ideal,' he says. The man then reels off the names of three chemical companies where he could get a job. 'Three of them, but you're just sitting here, researching the air.' Shankar is too engrossed in his reading even to reply. The

scene is instructive also for its neat contrast with the preceding one, in which Nita explains to a friend that she cannot study because she has to work; here, Shankar explains that he cannot work because he has to study.

Family man However much Shankar is committed to his PhD, he has another, even more demanding ideal—to get married and have a family. This desire to be a family man takes precedence over his studies and leads him into the dramatic decision to marry Gita, who is Nita's sister. The thinking behind this momentous decision is revealed in a key scene with Sanat and Nita sitting outside on a bench. Both wear glum faces. Sanat rubs his chin and says, 'It's just unbearable. Your suffering. I'll get a job, and you do the studying.' This is a major concession from him, but he wants to get married and this is the only solution he can imagine. 'I can easily find a job. Then we'll get married,' he says, with a mixture of hope and despair. But Nita rejects the idea; she cannot give up working because her family relies on her. Shankar takes this in and says, 'That means we'll have to wait until your brother becomes a success, right?' When Nita doesn't correct him, he sighs. Now, it is clear that he will not wait to marry Nita; he will instead achieve his goal of a family by marrying Gita. It is a betrayal, of course, but it is also consistent with his desire to have a family.

Shankar Shankar is Gita's older brother, who wants to be a musician. Shankar, Nita's brother, stays largely aloof from the family problems, his mother's bickering and especially from the love-triangle between Nita, Sanat and Gita. He is committed to becoming a professional singer of classical music and he appears to be a dreamer, but by the end we see that his self-confidence was not misplaced. He is sensitive, however, toward Nita, and remains loyal to her throughout. He can also be playful and enjoys joking with his sister.

Determined dreamer At the beginning of the story, Shankar plays the role of the detached artist with hopeless dreams of future greatness. This 'pie-in-sky' attitude is illustrated in an early scene with Nita inside the house. Shankar asks her for a few coins in order to get a shave. She indulges him, like a mother a small son, but recommends that he get a job. 'If my teacher only understood what a genius I am,' he says in reply. 'Besides, it's beneath an *artist* to take up a regular job.' The emphasis he places on the word 'artist' is meant to sound like self-parody, but we also sense that he is serious. 'Don't worry,' he continues, 'soon money will come raining through the roof.' When Nita gives him a disbelieving look, he shrugs as if to say 'what do the masses understand of artists?' and then walks outside toward a lake where he sits down to practice his singing. Here we have the double-layer of Shankar's character. He may be a dreamer, but he is also determined.

Sensitive The most endearing trait of his personality is his sensitivity toward Nita. While it is true that he can be accused of selfishness for not taking a job and thus forcing Nita to sacrifice herself, it is also true that he treats his sister with tenderness. Throughout the story, he addresses her as 'little sis' (using a Bengali endearment), and together they remember the happy days of their childhood. His sensitivity is revealed in a moving scene on the veranda of the house. It is dark. Shankar is practicing his sitar-playing when Nita comes out and urges him to eat. 'But you haven't eaten, either,' he says to her. She explains that she's waiting for him. Shankar then gives her a little smile, acknowledging her sacrifice. 'I impose on you, don't I?' he asks with regret. 'Don't be a sentimental slob,' she says to make light of the reality. 'No, really,' he goes on, 'I'm preventing your marriage, ruining your whole future.' She again tries to dismiss the problem, but he persists. 'I'm exploiting you. Deep down, it really hurts.' This is Shankar's torment: he knows he is exploiting his sister, and it hurts, but he can't stop. He must become a singer, which, in the end, he does, though it is too late to prevent Nita's death.

Gita	Gita is Nita's younger sister, who ultimately betrays her.
Montu	Montu is Nita's younger brother, a college student who likes sports.
Father	Nita's father is a more sympathetic man, a retired teacher.
Mother	Nita's mother is an unhappy and ungrateful person, ground down by the family's financial situation.



(Nita bears the burden of her family)



(Nita's calm acceptance of her betrayal, with Gita behind and Sanat in the foreground)



(The father reads a letter about his son's accident and hospitalisation)



(Nita and Sanat face a future without marriage)



(Gita, in the foreground, with Sanat and Nita, before the betrayal)



(Nita tells Sanat that she cannot marry, not now)



(Shankar and Nita, in happier times)