

Manoj Sharma, 2017

Volume 3 Issue 3, pp. 492 - 501

Date of Publication: 15th December, 2017

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2017.33.492501>

This paper can be cited as: Sharma, M. (2017). Cinematic Representations of Partition of India.

PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 3(3), 492-501.

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CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF PARTITION OF INDIA

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Abstract

The partition of India in August 1947 marks a watershed in the modern Indian history. The creation of two nations, India and Pakistan, was not only a geographical division but also widened the chasm in the hearts of the people. The objective of the paper is to study the cinematic representations of the experiences associated with the partition of India. The cinematic portrayal of fear generated by the partition violence and the terror accompanying it will also be examined. Films dealing with partition have common themes of displacement of thousands of masses from their homelands, being called refugees in their own homeland and their struggle for survival in refugee colonies. They showcase the trauma of fear, violence, personal pain, loss and uprooting from native place. Also, how the cinematic space tries to recreate those horrors, bestial passions and disregard for humanity in the larger political arena will also be examined. At the same time, sexuality and gender relations where women's bodies became site of conflict between two communities will also be discussed. Moreover, how the personal experiences of filmmakers during the times of partition shaped their cinematic depictions will also be enumerated. Films which remind us of that communal carnage called partition, for instance, Lahore (1949, Hindi), Chhinamula (1951, Bengali)

Megha Dhaka Tara (1960, Bengali), Subarnrekha (1965, Bengali) Garm Hawa (1973, Hindi), Tamas (1987, Hindi) Bombay (1995, Hindi), 1947 Earth (1998, Hindi), Gadar: Ek Prem Katha (1998) Fiza (2002, Hindi), Pinjar (2003, Hindi) Dev (2003, Hindi), Partition (2007, English) and Midnight Children (2012, English) will be examined.

Keywords

Partition of India, Violence of Partition, Displacement, Communal, Gender Relations, Sexuality, Filmmakers

1. Introduction

The partition of India in August 1947 marks a watershed in the modern Indian history. The creation of two nations, India and Pakistan, was not only a geographical division but also widened the chasm in the hearts of the people. The objective of the paper is to study the cinematic representations of the people’s experiences associated with the partition of India. The cinematic portrayal of fear generated by the partition violence and the terror accompanying it will also be examined. Films dealing with partition have common themes of displacement of thousands of masses from their homelands, being called refugees in their own homeland and their struggle for survival in refugee colonies. They showcase the trauma of fear, violence, personal pain, loss and uprooting from native place. Also, how the cinematic space tries to recreate those horrors, bestial passions and disregard for humanity in the larger political arena will also be examined. At the same time, sexuality and gender relations where women’s bodies became site of conflict between two communities will also be discussed. Moreover, how the personal experiences of filmmakers during the times of partition shaped their cinematic depictions will also be enumerated.

2. Politics of Partition

The Two-Nation theory viewed partition as “the logical and inevitable outcome of the irreconcilable opposition between Hindus and Muslims” (Hasan, 1993). The partition was seen as a consequence of the policy of ‘Divide and Rule’ followed by the imperial masters. Moreover, it was also seen as a result of the role of Indian National Congress and Muslim League in supporting ‘separatist politics and reinforcing communitarian identities around shared values and symbols.’ (Page, Inder Singh, Moon, Khosla &

Hasan, 2002 have all written from this perspective). Recent research tries to see partition as a process and not as an event. There is an emphasis on using alternate sources like personal diaries, letters, pamphlets, memoirs, and oral sources in the form of interviews. Moreover, literature has also been used as source of history writing. Indian cinema has also used literature in its depiction of partition experiences. *Garm Hawa* was based on a story by Ismat Chughtai, *Tamas* was based on Bhisham Sahni's novel of the same name, *Pinjar* on Amrita Pritam's novel of the same name, and *1947 Earth* was based on Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy Man* and *Train to Pakistan* on Khushwant Singh's novel of the same name. In this context, study of cinematic portrayal of partition is useful in understanding the complexities involved in the partition experiences.

The fast pace at which British withdrew from India showed their abdication of responsibility to deal with the already volatile situation which led to death and destruction in the communal inferno of partition (Wolpert, 2006). This 'shameful flight' was also reflective of their true character as they felt no responsibility when they had no profits to reap. The term 'shameful flight' was used by Winston Churchill, Opposition Leader, in his prophetic warning to Prime Minister Clement Atlee's government in the British House of Commons during the first debate over Labour's Indian Independence Bill.

Their apathy and dereliction of duty could also be seen in appointment of two Boundary Commissions, one for Punjab and another for Bengal, headed by British lawyer Cyril Radcliffe who knew nothing about Indian conditions and geography and made a mess in terms of dividing the region in two parts - India and Pakistan (Sarkar, 1983).

3. Violence of Partition: Physical and Emotional

During partition, violence between different communities was quite rampant. Not many films are made on the theme of partition as the policies of the state always restrained the filmmakers from venturing in to controversial areas and partition was no exception (Joshi, ed., 2004). In Punjab, the experiences were more violent in nature. During partition violence, 'rape abduction and killing' became the chief constituents of partition of India (Pandey, 2003). The explosive situation as also realized by Jawaharlal Nehru was "murder stalks the streets and the most amazing cruelties are indulged in by

both the individual and the mob” (Chandra, et al., 1990). The vulnerability of women during the times of violence and bloodshed has been studied in detail in recent times. Moreover, the bodies of women became prized possessions of their captors and the conflict of communities was played over the bodies of women (Butalia, 1998, Menon & Bhasin, 1993, Kidwai, 1990 have dealt on this theme in their works).

In her book *Mool Suta Ukhde (Torn from the Roots)*, Kamlaben Patel, who was a social worker associated with retrieval of women abducted during partition, has mentioned that around seventy- five thousand women were abducted and raped during the carnage of partition (Butalia,1998). By March 1948, four and half million Hindus and six million Muslims had become refugees (Moon, 1961). An estimated fifteen million people were displaced in the largest forced migration of the 20th century. Approximately 100,000 women were kidnapped in both India and Pakistan. Women were particularly wronged as they were symbols of community honour. Most of the studies of violence were Punjab-centric in nature (Talbot & Singh, 2009). But during the partition riots Mahatma Gandhi, a seventy-seven year old man, walked in different parts of the country to calm the nerves of fellow countrymen and douse the fire of partition. In a tour of seven weeks, Gandhi walked one hundred sixteen miles and addressed nearly hundred village meetings (Guha, 2007).

In the initial years of independence, we do not find many films on partition. *Dharmputra* (Hindi, 1961) directed by Yash Chopra dealt with issues of religious intolerance, fanaticism and communalism during the times of partition (*The Hindu*, Feb 6, 2010). The first most sincere portrayal of partition trauma can be seen in *Garm Hawa (Hot Winds, Hindi-Urdu, 1973)* of M.S. Sathyu. It was based on a story by Ismat Chughtai and scripted by Kaifi Azmi and Shama Zaidi. It depicted the various hardships encountered by a Muslim family in Agra during partition and its aftermath, their dilemma of whether to migrate to Pakistan or not, and their final decision to stay in India. It is one of the few serious films dealing with the post-partition predicament of Muslims in India (Ray, 2005). *Tamas* (1987) of Govind Nihlani showcased the trauma of violence, personal pain, loss and uprooting from native place.

4. Sexuality and Fear

The vulnerability of women during the times of violence and bloodshed has been studied in detail in recent times. The way in which the conflict of communities was played over the bodies of women has been dealt by several scholars (Butalia, 1998, Menon & Bhasin, 1993). It has also been portrayed in certain films like *Lahore* (1949) *Train to Pakistan* (1997) *1947 Earth* (1999), *Hey Ram* (2000) and *Pinjar* (2003). Suvir Kaul refers to jingoism displayed during India-Pakistan cricket matches as if completing the 'unfinished businesses of partition (Kaul, ed., 2001). The numerous incidents are narrated where women jumped in to wells to end their lives rather than their 'honour' being ravished by men of other religion and communities. The portrayal of such a scene in *Tamas* (*Darkness*, 1987) gave an 'iconic significance' to such incidents. *Khamosh Pani* (*Silent Water*, Hindi 2003) has also depicted such a scene in which women jump in to a well to protect their honour. Furthermore, men killed women of their own family and community to save their honour from marauders. The violence was further perpetrated in the form of forced conversions and marriages. *Khamosh Pani* (*Silent Water*, Hindi, 2003), and *Pinjar* (*Skeleton*, Hindi, 2003) are on the theme of women who were raped and finally married their perpetrators, converted to their religion and settled with them. They lost their identity and blood relations for their survival. Recent research has raised questions on how women were mistreated during the carnage of partition and their wishes were subsumed in the policies framed by the state (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). A film titled *Train to Pakistan* (Hindi, 1998) recounts the violence, bloodshed and horrors associated with the Partition of India in 1947.

Another important issue was the impression that violence and bloodshed caused to the psyche of a generation who were witness to these incidents. During their adulthood, they became more sensitive in their approach. Some of these people brought forward their experiences in their writings and also through the kaleidoscope of cinema. In the field of cinema, some people who had first hand experiences of partition and who later became well known personalities made immense contribution with their understanding and insight of partition. Some of them are Govind Nihalani, Shyam Benegal, Ritwik Ghatak, Gulzar, Bhisham Sahni to name a few. Shyam Benegal's film

Mammo (1994) also depicts the pain of partition and his *Zubeidaa* is also set in the background of partition.

5. Dislocations and Displacement: Feeling of Rootlessness

The issue of dislocation and displacement is another aspect which has wider connotation than mere geographical. Moreover, apart from economic misery and physical abuse, the pain and trauma of being labeled as refugees in their own homeland are some other aspects which have been deeply probed recently in the histories of memories (Butalia, 1998). By March 1948, four and half million Hindus and six million Muslims had become refugees (Moon, 1961).

Chinnamul (The Uprooted, 1951) showed the colonial apathy in terms of partition of India and consequent violence. It reflected the filmmakers' personal concern with immediate social realities (Ray, 1995). The displacement partition caused; violence it led to; starvation and impoverishment it generated marked the subject-matter of the film. The film was mostly shot outdoors capturing documentary shots with hidden cameras and impromptu shooting as the situation offered (Basu, 2001). There is absolutely no violence in the film in the overt sense of the term and the only instance when the forewarned violence almost appears on the screen is during villages' attempted dislodging from the large house they had occupied (Basu, 2001). But the covert violence of uprooting, displacement, starvation, poverty, hunger and lack of identity is evident throughout the film.

An important scene of the film is when the old lady refuses to vacate her house and migrate to Calcutta. The old lady was a real refugee who would not listen to any instruction for acting and would claim "I know the pain of leaving home" (Basu, 2001). There is a use of symbolism in the film. The bird's nest and lamp are not commonplace images; they are metaphors commonly used in the folk idiom of those about whom the film was made (Basu, 2001). They are indicative of displacement of masses and their dimming hope in the face of collaboration of colonial and Indian interests which led to the brutal division of their country of origin. Another instance of symbolism is when the lands of migrants are measured and sold to both Hindu and Muslim moneylenders – symbolizing division of India.

Ritwik Ghatak dealt with as partition as his focal theme, and certainly looked at the consequence of this splitting up on the dislocations and displacement of families (Vasudevan, 2010). Ghatak's trilogy (*Megha Dhaka Tara - The Cloud-Capped Star*, 1960; *Komal Gandhar - E-Flat*, 1961; and *Subarnarekha - Golden Lining*, 1962) was a contemptuous denunciation of the crumbling humanity and vanishing human values (Gope, 1985). These three films are a 'scathing indictment' of the insane event of partition (Kaushiva, 2008). They view partition as a process or a continuing experience. Urvarshi Butalia sees it as the continuing presence of the past in our present and whose dark shadows of violence, trauma, displacement and rootlessness become part of our daily lives (Butalia, 1998). Ghatak portrayed the predicament of the displaced refugees for whom partition cast its shadow in shaping their future lives (Kaushiva, 2008). In Ghatak's films, nostalgia for the once undivided Bengal and the pain inflicted by displacement and rootlessness is clearly evident (Hood, 2000). His films reflected his anxiety to find root or refuge. He argued that how partition struck at the roots of Bengali culture (Donnel, 2005). His quest, as a refugee for a new identity could be seen in a larger context of an effort at depicting the relationship among the new classes created by the process of urbanization and the machine revolution and their old way of life (Rajyadhaksha, 1982). In a way, Ghatak externalized his personal agony into a global perspective which could be understood and felt in India, Poland, Vietnam, Palestine, Germany, Korea, any nation which had suffered the pain of separation and the 'bleeding scar of an overnight border'(Kaushiva, 2008). Ghatak says that he tackled the refugee issue as the division of a culture (Film Miscellany, 1976).

Ritwik Ghatak brilliantly used sound as a conscious tool in the design of the film. It not only heightened the effect but also commented and analyzed 'the immediate dialogical and narrative context' (Banerjee ed., 1982). In *Megha Dhaka Tara*, the sound of the whiplash is a conventional literary simile for humiliation (Das Gupta, 2008). Ghatak also used the device of deep focus photography (Deep Focus Photography / Cinematography DFC or Pan Focus Cinematography - DFC tended towards long duration sequences, the avoidance of cutaways and reaction shots, and the employment of a meticulously placed camera that only moved when necessary, and the use of unobtrusive virtually invisible editing) to place his characters firmly in their social environment

(Banerjee, 1982). While *Megha Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha* portray the degeneration of ethics in the milieu of partition of India, in *Komal Gandhar* he depicted the politics of partition vis-à-vis the theatre group which was once unified but now divided and engaged in ugly politics (Kaushiva, 2008). His cinema was reflective of violent assertion of the people's identity and desire to live (Raina, 1983).

Tamas (1987) deals with the slaughter and migration of Sikh and Hindu families to India in the backdrop of riot-stricken Pakistan. It shows a shocking side of politics and the empathetic side of humanity that survives any massacre. *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001) starring Sunny Deol and Amisha Patel is a love story set in the background of partition of India. The film was hugely successful for its music and fiery dialogues. *Partition* (2007) directed by Vic Sarin is set in 1947, based on the partition of India. It is a tale of love amidst the partition violence. It sensitively portrays the trauma, fear and pain of separation experienced by the people during the partition. It also portrays the hope and optimism so necessary during such torrid times.

Midnight's Children (2012) directed by Deepa Mehta is an adaptation of Salman Rushdie's 1981 novel with the same title. It narrates the life of children who were born on the fateful night of Indian independence. It also portrays the events associated with the partition of India in a thought provoking way. *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag (Run Milkha Run, Hindi, 2013)* also portrays the agony of violence and displacement experienced by the victims of partition - violence.

Thus, it can be argued that cinema has indeed portrayed the experiences and the personal pain of the victims of partition of India. It has, in a way, tried to document such a history in its own creative ways. Such depictions not only highlight the personal anguish of the victims but also try to locate these personal experiences in the historical context in which they take place.

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