

Frames of Displacement: Reimagining Partition through Cinema's Hidden Narratives

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Abstract— *This paper examines the Partition of India through micro-narratives, focusing on individual experiences rather than the grand, meta-narratives driven by political leaders like Gandhi, Jinnah, and Mountbatten. The research aims to explore how cinema, as a medium, portrays the lived experiences of those affected by the partition, challenging the dominant political and national discourses. The paper addresses the research gap by emphasizing how films such as Earth, Garam Hawa, Gandhi, Jinnah, Mammo, and Midnight's Children foreground the individual and collective traumas of displacement, contrasting with the traditional narratives of statehood and religious division. The significance of the research lies in its ability to highlight the emotional and psychological aftermath of partition, often overlooked in historical accounts. Using a qualitative analysis of films, the paper adopts a narrative approach, employing Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm and Walter Benjamin's concept of the "optical unconscious" to analyze cinematic representations of partition. The study explores how the moving image facilitates a deeper understanding of personal experiences during partition, offering insights into the human side of historical events. By analyzing these films selected through convenient sampling, the research seeks to deconstruct the meta-narratives of history and politics, proposing a shift towards micro-narratives that challenge and complicate the accepted historical accounts.*

Indexed Terms- *Cinema, History, Micro-narratives, Narrative paradigm, Partition.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to understand the Partition of India through the micro-narratives of people as against meta-narratives of nation, politics and region in select films. The question which looms large is what role can film play in this context. I have here attempted to show how stories of individuals have been presented in time and space through the moving image.

Walter Benjamin's theories on the "optical unconscious" (2009) have largely focused on the dimensions of the cinematic image. In this context,

films on partition have focused on the lived-in experience of displaced persons in time and space. Cinematic images showing the horrors of partition have opened a new realm of experience, which is never perceived by written documents.

It is a fact that the politics of the times had led to the carnival and the rejoicing of independence and separate statehood as in the films, *Jinnah* and *Gandhi*. But the terror and mayhem, which followed it became the food of the cannibal (Baudrillard, 2008). My paper tries to understand the paradox of partition, which oscillated between the 'carnivalisation' and 'cannibalization of power' (Baudrillard, 2008).

The study begins with the following research questions, - to what extent do micro-narratives of people of the sub-continent present the travails of partition? In what ways can the following films challenge the established, grand narratives of partition in history as represented by political leaders like Gandhi, Jinnah and Lord Mountbatten?

Urvashi Butalia (2000) in *The Other Side of Silence* has analyzed the trauma of partition on the individual lives of people through the examination of diaries, letters, memoirs and parliamentary documents. This study takes off from the margins of history, where Butalia has highlighted the effects of partition on children, women and the masses.

I begin my study by illustrating the grand narratives in the representation of the partition of India in films like *Gandhi and Jinnah*. Following that, I propose to deal with micro-narratives in films like *Garam Hawa, Mammo, Earth, and Midnight's Children*. Jinnah (1998) illustrates the scenario from a politico-religious viewpoint. In the film, Jinnah confirms that nowhere in India is Muslims safe and secure (0:43-2:47). Again, he explains:

“It will be equally insane to leave a Muslim minority at the hands of a Hindu majority” (10:20:8-2:47).

Jinnah’s grand vision is to take Muslims to Pakistan, which he designates as “a country of purity and compassion” (0:14-2:47). His antagonism against Gandhi becomes evident when he asserts:

“The one thing which keeps the British in India is the false idea of a United India, as preached by Gandhi. A united India, I repeat, is a British creation myth, and a very dangerous myth; which will cause endless strife” (1:06:48; 1:07:48-2:47).

Jinnah rejected the fallacy of the one-India policy and yet had to confront the truth—“You create Pakistan and millions die in the division of one country into two pieces” (6:07; 60-2:47). Religion played a radical role in the revolution of the masses and which later caused the bifurcation of India (46:16-2:47).

Jinnah’s vision of a land of purity has been envisioned against the presence of Hindu fanatics in India (1:10:40-2: 47) who according to him, demanded a “Hindu India” (1:11-2:47). The film shows how Pakistan became an obsession and an “ideal” with him, which he felt held his people together (1:28:20-2:47). At the very end, refugees are seen marching from India to Pakistan (1:45:00:39-2:47) and from Pakistan to India (1:33: 20-2:47).

Gandhi (1982), directed and produced by Richard Attenborough, has a different story to tell about the leadership of the masses. Gandhi’s forte was his ability to connect with the masses. Gandhi represented the cause of Indians through his Satyagraha and practice of ahimsa as forms of resistance. The film presents his opposition to the grand narratives of the British Empire. The nature of his leadership was based on a common ground of affinity with all Indians—“we should all be united irrespective of religion, caste, and creed” (1:40; 20-3:11:14).

Interestingly, the film questions the status of Gandhi as a revolutionary. Gandhi, as presented by Kingsley, had a penchant for merging all micro-narratives into one meta-discourse. This simplified narrative could not answer the questions raised by the horrors of partition. The film shows how the masses felt

discredited at the decision of their leaders to bifurcate the country.

In films like *Garam Hawa* (1974) on the other hand, the director focuses on how the Indian subcontinent has been divided and lives are shattered after the partition. “Storms rage in every heart, it’s the same here or there” (2:26-3:03). After the partition funeral pyres were lit in every home;

“The flames mount higher. Every city is deserted: it’s the same here or there. No one heeds the Geeta; no one heeds the Koran. Faith has lost all meaning; here or there” (2:47-3:03).

Garam Hawa highlights that the partition was due to the blind volatility of the masses, led by selfish politics. The schism bled the subcontinent and diluted the ideologies of religion and nationhood. “In past troubles, no one left and ran away. Now Allah has created a partition for us, who wants to die miserably here?”(5:32; 50-3:03).

Even though “Hindus and Muslims fraternize in Delhi” (6:23-3:03), the film shows how the Muslim workers in Salim’s factory have left for Pakistan. Jobs both in Pakistan and India have been prioritized. The problem is a profound one. *Garam Hawa* is a unique film as it places the opposing religious narratives at par, suggesting that something is more at stake in the new order of things following partition and those are monetary considerations. Money passes under the table in terms of business considerations.

When Salim Mirza has to look for a new house after mortgaging his ancestral home, it becomes clear that the change is due to financial issues. “It’s nothing to do with Hindu or Muslim” (44:56-3:03).

But, there are conflicting narratives. Salim is branded as a spy since he had dispatched letters to Pakistan. But, though this binary narrative becomes axiomatic in the order of things, the film posits a very different ideology. It is a bitter truth that Shadab betrays the daughter of Salim, who commits suicide. Even Halim, who migrated to Pakistan doesn’t keep in contact with her. Salim’s close friend also betrays him. Indian Muslims suffer since they “have no faith in each other” (22:05-3:03).

The last scene is compounded by several moving images. Salim and his son refuse to leave India for Pakistan since considerations of home become more important than anything else. Facing an angry mob, Salim locks up his house. Yet he returns, facing the same mob. The new spirit of an evolving India is suggested here.

“Those who view the storm from afar, they see no difference between here and there to join and become part of it” (2:46-3:03).

Our next film, *Mammo* (1994) presents the travails of Muslims, who had their home in undivided India. But after partition, they are faced with dilemmas of affiliation to their country of faith. The film highlights the plight of Mammo, who is rejected by her relations in Pakistan. So she migrates to Bombay to stay with her sister with whom she forms an indelible bond of togetherness. Yet, in India, she is not allowed to stay for long since she is a citizen of Pakistan.

The film does not focus on the ideologies of Nehru, Jinnah or Gandhi. Rather, it focuses on issues of home, consequent upon partition as well as the bond between two aged siblings shown very vividly. Different strands of narrative like Mammo’s story along with her sister’s and especially the bonding with her sister’s grandson have been presented in the film. The director even focuses on Mammo’s liaison with police officers in India. But she is never disconsolate. She even creates her niche in her relations with her grandson, to whom she resorts to lying about his father who abandoned him as a child.

Khalid Mohamed, who wrote the script for the film says in an interview on YouTube:

“ *Mammo* is not a story of a particular person but a collection of a lot of stories I heard in my childhood people who have been separated by the forces of politics, as well as Partition” (2019).

Deepa Mehta’s *Earth* (1998), is based on Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel, *Cracking India* (1991). The scenario is Lahore, following the Partition of India. It focuses on the travails of a Parsi family, clinging on to their home and hoping to remain neutral in the strife between Muslims and Hindus as well as Sikhs. The director presents the sanctity of home in beautiful

images. Lenny, a young girl with polio is looked after by her ayah, Shanta. She is loved by her group of admirers including the Ice-Candy man, Hassan and the Masseur. They form a heterogeneous group with the three of them belonging to different faiths. The story largely centres on the conglomeration of friends belonging to different faiths in the group, who are basically friendly to each other at first but later succumb to the partition narrative.

This film portrays how various religious communities, who lived in peace in India “suddenly started to clamour for pieces of India for themselves” (1: 52-1:39:31). Even Lenny is astonished: “Can anyone break a country?”(3:04-1:39:31). Earth attempts to answer this question in several ways. Firstly, it focuses on the importance of self-rule and on the hope that “we will settle our differences ourselves” (7:16- 1:39:31). It is based on an idealism, which, of course, doesn’t last as the mayhem follows the partition of India-“In the eyes of God we are all equals. You’re a Hindu; I’m a Muslim. What’s the difference?” (13:32-1:39:31)

The message of the film, however, is not about the enmity between the Hindus and Muslims. It is about the micro-narratives inside us. Either we are rational beings or “bastards”. Even the little girl, Lenny tells Shanta, her maid that.

“If you’re with me then the animal that’s within me will be controlled”(1:03:02-1:39:31).

I end my discussion with Salman Rushdie’s novel and its movie adaptation of the stories of partition; of stories of little people and places. This film deconstructs the hegemony and agenda of political leaders, who used the partition to carve out two geographical units, which they iconized by terms like statehood and nation. In his unique manner, Rushdie has parodied the very term independence and creation of India and Pakistan by referring to the people of India as ‘midnight’s children. These children satirize the postures of politicians, who have used the partition to further their interests.

Midnight’s Children (2013) highlights several micro-narratives outside the meta-narratives of history. He especially shuns the religious factor by quoting that Mia Abdullah was against the partition of India

(2:03:21-2:08:39). He reduces the meta-narrative by projecting the effects of partition on individuals.

Saleem's narrative, for example, begins at midnight, when he was "mysteriously handcuffed to history" (06:43-2:08:39). The twin births of Saleem and Shiva become events in history since at midnight "Pakistan and India were born, washing in each other's blood" (1; 39:04-2:08:39). At the meeting, magic spells are uttered. The midnight children meet together, but we are reminded that "in those days all our fights were between friends" (1:35:05-2:08:39).

Partition of India is given a magical realist connotation in the night which followed –"a continuous midnight that would last for years (1:51:36-2:08: 39). Instead of being children of "dignity", midnight's children become "potential pain in the neck" (1:52:30-2:08:39) because they illustrate that "promises are made to be broken" (2:00:11-2:08:39). This paradox of the partition is spelt out in the text itself-

"And in all the cities all the towns all the villages the little dia-lamps burn on window-sills porches verandahs, while trains burn in Punjab, with green flames of blistering paint and the glaring saffron of fired fuel, like the biggest Dias in the world. And the city of Lahore, too, is burning" (Rushdie, 155).

Walter Fisher has theorized the narrative paradigm in which he finds that human beings can compose good stories and narrate them convincingly. He has stressed that stories sometimes can highlight events more than logical arguments. Narratives, however, might refer to real stories in history (time) or in fiction located in imaginary spaces.

It was Walter Fisher (1987), who used the paradigm of narrative theory in communicative theories. In his essay on *Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm* (1984), he has grounded his idea of a "narrative paradigm" on the belief that "man is in actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal" (MacIntyre 201). Partition films are sometimes based on a sequence of actions and dialogues which have a lasting psychological impact.

The narrative perspective, therefore, has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds, to stories of living and stories of imagination" (Fisher 2). The problem here is that if the narrative paradigm is accepted, it is bound to conflict with meta-narratives like the rational paradigm offered by the nation-state (3). The events of the partition as showcased in the films stated above deconstructs the concept that "humans are essentially rational beings" (4).

In other words, narration as story-telling, especially in the form of fiction focuses on the individual, whereas the grand narratives of history and the rhetoric of politics in the form of nation-building focus on the ideologues of power. Cinema in the light of the above films posits the tragedy of hapless. In the light of the mayhem consequent from partition, cinema raises the status, the onus and the narrative of the individual, who is often forced to toe the line of a particular community. Thus, through the power of the moving image, the above films have the power to challenge the popular assumptions of meta-narratives of history, politics and religion.

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