

Tracing Hyphenated Identities and the Bifurcation of the South Asian Sub-continent During 1947 through Cinematic Projection of Loss and Mourning

Kajal Dagar

Research Scholar

C.C.S. University, Meerut, India

TGT English Uttar Pradesh, India

Email: kajaldagar6@gmail.com

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Kajal Dagar

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Artistic Narration 2024,
Vol. XV, No. 1,
Article No. 8 pp. 46-52

Online available at:
<https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/artistic-narration-2024-vol-xv-no1-233>

*"I am accused of tending to the past
as if I made it,
as if I sculpted it
with my own hands. I didn't.
This past was waiting for me
when I came,
a monstrous unnamed baby,
and I with my mother's itch
took it to the breast
and named it
History."*

-Lucille Clifton (Quilting: Poems)

Abstract

Reciting the horror of 1947 and an attempt to write the moment of struggle for survival back into history remains at best a formidable task even after five decades. The bifurcation of British India in 1947 was not only a berserk movement but a cataclysmic trauma that rendered the human psyche shell-shocked. More of a communal and religious vendetta further inflamed by power-hungry politicians, the Indo-Pakistan war of Independence brings back the memory of the Nazi Holocaust with a myriad of European Jews carbonized to death in gas chambers. But the line of difference becomes apparent when Partition seems "more 'unhistorical' and inexplicable than the holocaust, for this was no industrialized slaughter, directed from a distance, but a hand-to-hand, face-to-face destruction, frequently involving neighbor against neighbor" (Pandey 45). Though Art, Literature, Films, Documentaries, Legal records, Politics, Oral History and culture cannot entirely capture and shed the specter of 1947 blood history a concrete mapping of it by understanding the role of Cinema in general and Hindi Cinema in particular can act as a litmus test to figure out the cause-effect relationship of such a brutal carnage.

Keywords

1947 Partition, Partition film industry, Hindi Cinema, Religion, mohajirs.

This paper endeavors to talk about National Cinema's ambivalent role in reconstructing partition memories and 'mourning the mayhem of 1947' which cannot be undone. For this purpose, the paper has been divided into three sections where the first few pages examine the typology employed by Cinema in mourning a collective loss and a brief reading of cinematic studies as an attempt to recapture the dead. Then the next section ululates the lived experience of a moment that is long lost but is still ferociously trying to make its presence felt thus bringing to the forefront the trope of 'remembering and forgetting'. For this purpose, the television series *Tamas* (meaning, *darkness*) directed by Govind Nihalani in 1988 after coming across Bhisham Sahni's *Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel Tamas* in 1982, has been discussed at length. The miniseries *Tamas* as an attempt to recapture the national history of war and bloodshed acknowledges, continuities with the past and echoes the marauding and butchering of millions of innocent souls under the garb of religious fanaticism, communalism and politick of the bygone times. Towards the end of the paper have been discussed, the nuances imbibed in emphatic silence which to date surround hyphenated individuals, displaced families, and uprooted communities that were transformed and branded into *mohairs (refugee communities)*. Further, an account of the life after the Partition of a few dislocated people has been included in this paper and is analyzed following contemporary times, which on one hand brings to the forefront the hazy remembrance of the partition history as a catastrophe in modern India but on the other hand also substantiates a desire to memory the past and know what is it that transpired during 1947 that still calls for a need to mourn?

Cinema, especially the 'Partition film industry'¹ doesn't work to opportune guilt on either side nor does it try to pacify and consolidate various ethnic and national identities in South Asia through its depiction of the Partition history (Pandey 3). Rather it brings into the limelight one of the fundamental elements that instigated this love-hate relationship and animosity among different ethnic and religious communities and thus paved the way for the barbaric onslaught among neighbors' resulting in an indescribable bloodbath of 1947. Hindi Cinema with films like *Ghatak*, *Tamas*, *Garam Hawa* and many others plunge into some kind of retrospection which traces the banality of life from 'down there' where peasants, landless laborers, Dalit sweepers, triply marginalized women, Muslim artisans and many other unacknowledged poor, faceless masses lost their lives for some political zealots or to say, self-appointed representatives of Hindus, Muslims and Sikh Community (Pandey 20). After all, one must know who remained the object of nationalist schemes? While focusing on the cinematic representation which is capable of stretching a historical moment of loss and victimization in time and space, one needs to question how effective is Cinematic historiography in speaking on behalf of the dead. One acceptable answer to this question can be, that films that particularly deal with partition, try to mark the distinction

between the ‘victim’s consciousness’ and the ‘consciousness of the victim’ as directors like Govind Nihalani claim to share both as he moved from his birthplace Karachi (now in Pakistan) to India during the 1947 Partition. Cinema then employs, what historian Shahid Amin suggests, a detailed understanding of “the relationship between the ‘facts of history’, popular remembrance, and matters of belief” (Amin 30). To underscore the role of Cinema in representing a collective loss, my argument shall follow what Bhaskar Sarkar has pointed out in his seminal work that Andre Brazin, a theorist and psychoanalyst, talking about the plastic arts as a mode to preserve life traces against their indispensable disintegration with time says, “If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation. The process might reveal that at the origin of painting and sculpture, there lies a ‘mummy complex’”. Then in an essay entitled “Death Every Afternoon”, Brazin points out that likewise Cinema is not only capable of freezing time but is also able to reproduce and reconstruct it, “Art of time, cinema has the exorbitant privilege of repeating it” (cited in Sarkar 19-20).

Now the second section of this paper shall focus on the cinema’s hermeneutic of nationalism by examining the tele series *Tamas* (1988) directed by Govind Nihalani, to bring the nuances entrenched in the political façade which palpably permeated through the Partition holocaust thus rendering the ‘human rights of survival’ as a mere subject of discourse. *Tamas*, as Bhaskar Sarkar also points out, is set up in an undivided Punjab when Partition has already become a necessary evil, opens up with a low-caste worker or so-called *chamar*, Nathu, while slaughtering a pig. Taking orders from a local contractor who is a mere pawn in the hands of sinister schemers, Nathu much against his will fulfills the task but with a sense of apprehension lurking underneath. This small incident provides the driving motive to the entire film which culminates in brutal carnage that is at the heart of the Partition saga. Nathu’s inability to confess his guilt in front of his wife echoes the trope of 1947 violence, a time when everyone went into sheer madness and took leave of reason and ethics thus becoming savage, barbaric and inhumane. On one hand, Nathu in the film is used as an agent to aggravate the cause of riots while on the other hand, he becomes the circumstantial victim of those with authority whose motive settles around the ‘power-wealth-politics’ wheel. *Tamas* also critiques the trenchant religious fanaticism quite visible when a militant Hindu organization though not named in the series but easily perceivable as RSS², forcibly dragged a young boy, Ranbeer, into killing a person from another community by referring to him as an enemy. Thus the trial becomes a habit and butchering and murdering of people from opposite religious communities follows. *Tamas* effectively captures the illogical killings on either side, at best pictured in Shahnwaz Khan’s, a Muslim friend of Lalaji who escorts his

family to safety in a Hindu locality, violently kicks Nanku (Lalaji's manservant) as Shahnwaz loses his sanity on hearing lamentations and funeral incantations from a nearby mosque.

Thus *Tamas* artistically reaches the reconstruction of the Partition saga where many innocent and helpless *Nankus* lost their lives in the face of lost humanity, threatened sanity and disfigured rationality. The sight of the mourners who belong to Shahnwaz's Muslim sect finally managed to trigger the inchoate upheaval hiding underneath and is leashed in a manner that makes even a cultured and understanding fellow like him, more of a religious zealot. Moreover, insensitivity and class hierarchy become profound when posed under the 'opportunism' of the moment of crisis. All the political representatives of the Congress Party and Muslim League including Bakshi Ji and Hayat Baksh (who earlier in the film, hardly settled their minds on one proposal) came together to settle the riots by negotiating with the emotions of those wounded and groaning in mortal pain. Landowners discussing real estate, traders agreeing on the price of flour during a temporal halt at slaughter and parallel to it running the fear of losing lives, pictures the brutal catastrophe which possibly had occurred during 1947. Thus *Tamas* precisely questions every possible threat to 'human rights' and gross violation of 'survival rights' around 1947. Political stratagems that led to unimaginable suffering and the results of cynical power-play are vehemently criticized in this television series (Sarkar 230-247).

Though most of the violence in film occurs backstage only and what the audience gets to see at last are dead and groaning bodies which provide tactile sensations with the help of auditory sensors, still the question of representing brutality again and alive through cinematic portrayal asks for justification. Or do these cinematic efforts again sky hype the resentment and affinities of different religious communities? One probable answer to this question can be deployed from the film itself which is not only limited to accentuating the feeling of animosity among members of opposite religions but also pronounces the close kith and kin relationship among them that stood the test of time. A Hindu woman protects her Muslim neighbor, a school teacher whom she calls 'brother', with the sword in hand she criticizes members of her clan for propagating this tale of terrible affliction. Another Muslim woman giving shelter to an old Sikh couple, Harnam and Banto, much against her family's consent and then Shahnwaz escorting a Hindu family from a Muslim-dominated area without concerning his safety are some live examples of the other side of a long-harbored narrative of Partition History (240). Moreover, the Sikh community especially females, in the film, one hand, highlights their supreme religiosity and a desire to protect their honor from Muslim attackers by drowning themselves in a well but on the other side, it also

questions the choice of martyrdom which religion offers which seemingly is circumscribed to 'death' only. But why do only women have to die without exploring alternatives (other than death) like preferring the prospect of a not-so-honorable life? Menon and Bhasin talk about this particular violence assigned to women and say, "The figure of the abducted woman became symbolic of crossing borders, of violating social, cultural and political boundaries"(Menon, Bhasin). Thus women had to be sacrificed first to protect the rest. *Tamas* among the mere fanatics and political zealots also creates a truly patriotic revolutionary, Jarnail Singh, who didn't want partition and asserted that 'his Nation' could be truncated only 'over his dead body' and he is shot dead in the middle of his speech as Partition had already been contemplated and was merely waiting like a baby to be born. Karmo's shell-shocked face towards the end of the series draws attention towards her unborn child who finally comes into the world with an impending fate that is more grim and full of terror. Nihalani through cinematic projection analyzes the contemporary situation through the lens of Partition and echoes Sahni in believing that "the communal elements who created [Partition] holocaust are still active today and patterns to remain the same" (cited in Sarkar 234). The extent to which the 1947 trauma left people benumbed is cinematically depicted through Karmo's shell-shocked face.

Most of the survivors during the 1947 Partition lived with hyphenated identities and with Post-Independence secular Nations emerged various sets of such displaced identities including Pakistani Musalman, Indian-Musalman, Anglo-Indian and Kashmiri Pundits (Sarkar 36). Some of them became the locus of endless suspicion during time of extreme animosity between India and Pakistan where others were banished from their own homes and transported to other part of the independent India. People were uprooted from their birthplace and in a matter of few moments became refugees at their own place. This loss of identity and community post-partition becomes prominent in how survivors and hyphenated people narrate their stories. For example, Mohammad Khalid, a bookseller from the Jama Masjid area in *Purani Dilli* poignantly asks "*Mere hisse mein azadiaai hi kahan?*" He adds, "*Here, there is only Partition and the pain of Partition . . . virtually all my relatives are in Pakistan.*"³ Another incident is an angry response from a refugee Sikh shopkeeper who moved from his home in Rawalpindi as a child in March 1947 and is now living in Bhogal, a small *mohalla* congested between Jangpura, Lajpat Nagar and Ashram in New Delhi. When asked what he was doing on 15 August 1947, one response can be assumed which is Jawaharlal Nehru's Independence speech, "At the stroke of the midnight hour, while the world sleeps India will wake to life and freedom . . ." but ironically Atma Singh asks, "What

do you think we were doing?.” “Wondering where we would be the next day- whether we’d be able to stay on, even in this place . . . That’s what we were doing . . .”(cited in Pandey 125-126).⁴

In a lecture on 13 April 2017, a general discussion on representing religion in films, Prof. Harris Qadeer, pointed out that, after more than five decades of Partition, National Cinema has moved on to a more happy and contented portrayal of life in terms of religiosity and religious interests are not pictured as a cause of mortal violence, quite visible from films like *Veer Zara*, *My Name Is Khan* and others. Still not recalling and not featuring blood riots of 1947 in popular Cinema of the contemporary times doesn’t guarantee a collective loss of memory as an attempt to forget the painful past. But Film Industry to a greater extent has tried to move on, carrying the bitter memories of Partition alongside in search of a future which is not sullied by the presence of the past. We, as people who share a common history, can hardly ignore what Tamas advocated from the beginning, “Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it” (*Tamas*).

References

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3. (1996). Interview with Mohammad Khalid, published in *Deshkaal*. August. Pg. 21-22.
4. Interview with Atma Singh (Bhogal, 16 March).

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