Understanding Trauma and Cultural Memory Through Selected Partition Films in Hindi Cinema

¹Navdha Kishorkumar Joshi, ²Dr. Avneet Kaur
¹M.A. (English), ²Assistant Professor
¹Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune, India.

Abstract: *The Partition of India in 1947 is the second largest displacement occurred in the human history. Around 20 million people migrated across the borders and around 2 million people lost their lives. This watershed event changed the positions of India and Pakistan on the global map which impacted people in generational trauma and crisis. It has been tangentially portrayed in the political, social and historical canon for years in India. Cinema has been a significant visual domain which offers divergent and layered picture of the suffering of the humankind. The Indian Cinema and its interest in historical events provide us a space to reflect and mourn about the partition. This research aims to analyse how the partition is portrayed in Hindi cinema over the decades in the selected films like Tamas (1988), Earth (1998) and Pinjar (2003). These films are studied for their depiction of communal conflicts, marginalisation and collective memory. It is noteworthy that Indian cinema is strongly rooted in Partition Literature as Tamas, Earth and Pinjar are adapted from Hindi novels. The research embraces interdisciplinary approach, integrating collective trauma and cultural memory to understand the post-partition India through visual media. By implying qualitative approach, this research analyses narrative structure, character arcs and metaphors in the mentioned films. The research discusses how these films not only showcase the partition as merely a historical phenomenon, but raises questions regarding nationhood, identity and suffering.*

Keywords: *India-Pakistan Partition. Hindi Cinema, Migration, Displacement, Trauma, Cultural Memory*

I.   INTRODUCTION

In 1947, When British government decided to handover the authorities to Indian leaders; the country was divided into two different nations based on the religions: India and Pakistan. The partition of India was not just a division of a land but it was a catastrophic historical phenomenon which changed the fate of millions of people. The people were forced to migrate and the communities which were co-existing from generations were suddenly divided by hatred. The repercussions of the partition led to communal violence, sexual manipulation, loathing and political tensions between newly formed nations left lasting irreparable scars on the people of both the nations.

The human sufferings and supressed trauma have been vocalised in literature through the works of Saadat Hassan Manto, Bhisham Sahani, Khushwant Singh, Faiz Ahmd Faiz, Ismat Chughtai majorly. The Indian cinema, being a powerful mass media, has illustrated Partition and also contributed to the reconstruction and reinterpretation of cultural memory. Early films such as *Lahore* and *Dharmputra* dealt with personal loss and grief. While the later films such as *Garm Hava* and *Tamas* shifted its focus to expose the indifference of authorities and institutions to the human sufferings. The films like *Earth* and *Pinjar* addressed the psychological wounds left on humanity. This transformation mirrors the changed political scenarios of the nation.

Though, the partition and its aftermath have been a subject of historical and literary discussions, its cinematic representation have not received adequate critical attention. Relatively very few scholars have analysed how films visualise and convey the trauma of displacement and loss. The critical discussions often focus more on historical accuracy instead of the films' artistic and psychological aspects. This study aims to go beyond traditional historical interpretations and look at how cinematic techniques, including mise-en-scène, cinematography and narrative structure, serve as places of remembrance and emotional healing. This research problem stems from the idea of analysing how Hindi Partition Cinema has registered and portrayed the wounds of the partition in the selected films like *Tamas* (1988), *Earth* (1998) and *Pinjar* (2003) using the lens of Collective Trauma and Cultural Memory.

Research Methodology

This research uses qualitative method as it allows to study and analyse the selected films in detail through narration, dialogues, visuals and themes. The primary source for the research includes three films which have around 10 hours of watch time. It enables the research to be studied theoretically in a historical framework. It also focuses on interpretative dimension, exploring how what is represented in the films connects with the larger social and historical realities of the partition.

II.   TAMAS (1988): REMEMBERING PARTITION'S VIOLENCE

Tamas is a television series written and directed by Govind Nihlani, adapted from the Hindi novel of the same name by Bhisham Sahni (1974). It is Set in the backdrop of riot-stricken Pakistan at the time of the partition of India in 1947, the film deals with the plight of emigrant Sikh and Hindu families to India as a consequence of the partition. It is one of the striking cinematic representations of the partition. It depicts how communal hatred and political manipulation affects the lives of ordinary people and turned them into perpetrators and victims of violence.

The plot centres around Nathu, a Dalit Chamar. He was asked to kill a pig for veterinary purposes by the Muslim politician (Tamas 04:21). Nathu being completely unaware about the hidden purpose behind it, kills the pig. His one act becomes the reason for riots breakout and the whole village burns in the flames because the carcass was found at the gate of the mosque (Tamas 33:45) which sparks communal tension between Hindus and Muslims. The very opening scene of the series exposes the brutality at the heart of the partition.

The haunting depiction of partition portrays trauma as a collective experience through parallel sufferings rather than focusing on an individual story. Collective trauma refers to the shared psychological wound due to any horrific events. According to Jeffery C. Alexander, "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectively feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways." *Tamas* cinematically captures this process of how political upheavals affects the social fabric.

The expressionistic mise-en-scene emphasises the moral and emotional state of the nation. The setting includes closed spaces such as homes, temples and refugee camps which are dimly lit. The exterior spaces include broken homes, burning villages, forests and narrow streets expressing confinement. Every aspect mise-en-scene captures grief, pain and suffering of the people. The well-organised home of the British officer juxtaposes with the chaos happening on the street. Also, the British officer's apathy towards riots underlines colonial indifference to the sufferings of the people. The series has low-key lighting and deep shadows referring to the moral ambiguity, The colour palette is mostly based on earthy tones reflecting suffering and mourning.

In the first scene when Nathu kills the pig, he is unaware about its consequences. He later realises it when communal riots erupted (Tamas 1:40:25). This scene reflects Cathy Caruth's idea of *belatedness,* where trauma is understood lately. Following that, he blames himself for every misfortune happening with him and in the village. It also expresses that how violence can be stem from manipulation and fear on a collective level. The collective trauma is not just a visible violence or bloodshed but it is the shattering of trust among the people. As per the Freudian theory, the repressed trauma returns in disguise which happens with Nathu several times as he cannot escape the truth which became the part of his identity.

Another striking aspect is how women are portrayed as both victims and carriers of trauma. The close-ups of Kammo (4:14:43) and other women (4:15:37) in gurudwara exposes the supressed trauma carried by women. When the riots breakdown, all the women who took shelter in gurudwara decides to jump into the well, some even with their child, to save their honour (4:20:36). The series reflects on gendered aspect of trauma. The women chose death over dishonour. Nathu's guilt as a Dalit and women's silenced trauma uncovers the heavier burden which marginalised groups carry.

In the last frame, where Kammo gives birth to her child, the slogans of "Allah hu Akbar" and "Har Har Mahadev" (4:55:28) can be heard from distant showcasing that collective trauma can never attain neat endings. As Halbwachs says, collective memory is "continuous reconstruction". Societies remember, forget and reinterpret their wounds. *Tamas* captures the silence in the last scenes indicating that words cannot do justice to express the trauma.

III.   1947: EARTH (1998): A STORY OF MEMORY, BETRAYAL, AND BELONGING

Earth is a 1998 Indo-Canadian period romance drama film, starring Amir Khan and Nandita Das, directed by Deepa Mehta. It is inspired by Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* also known as *Ice Candy Man*. It is the second film in Deepa Mehta's "Element Trilogy". The story is set in Lahore, before and during the partition of India in 1947. It shows that partition was not just a division of the nation but it also shattered friendships, identities and moral beliefs.

The story is told through the eyes of an eight-year-old girl Lenny, a Parsi girl who has a polio, a physical disability. Parsi community was not caught up in the swirl of communal conflicts so Lenny was observing the

communal tensions from the distance. The plot centres on Shanti (played by Nandita Das), her caretaker. Shanti was the love interest of two young men named Dil Nawas, a Muslim ice-candy vendor (played by Amir Khan) and Hasan, a masseur and poet (played by Rahul Khanna). They used to daily meet in the garden of Lahore. The film sets its narrative in the idealised memory before the partition.

The film follows a classic three-act structure. In the first act, the audience is introduced to Lenny, Shanta, Dil Nawaz and Hasan. Lenny meets them and sees their relationship with childlike wonders. It portrays Lahore as a vibrant and diverse city. In the second act, the news of partition breakout, affecting their lives and bond. The focus suddenly shifts from harmony to chaos. The friends started questioning each other's loyalties, the park which once symbolised unity became the place for ideological differences and doubts. Whereas the third act, violence spreads across the nation. Lenny unknowingly reveals Shanta's hiding place and the film ends with her mourning voice.

The mise-en-scene of the film depicts the transformation Lahore went through before and after the partition. The film's opening scenes show Lahore in 1947 in a vibrant and harmonious place. In the initial scenes, Lahore is represented as a city of mosaic where people from different communities and culture share food and warmth. The park becomes a symbol of unity in diversity. However, as the plot moves towards partition, the atmosphere started filling with suspicion and doubt. The props used in the film functions as the visual metaphors for the trauma. Lenny holds a broken doll during the partition crisis; referring to her shattered childhood and the nation itself. Through mise-en-scene, the film shows everyday objects as a repository of trauma and crisis of the partition.

Using Jeffrey Alexander's concept of 'cultural trauma', the film highlights how a whole society works to redefine itself after experiencing shared violence. The most significant scene of the park where the blissful picture of Lahore before the partition mimics the undivided India which is untouched by hatred (09:06 – 13:58). The park becomes a witness to the shared laughter and friendships of different communities. When the partition breaks these bonds, the park's memory turns into a place of shared mourning. The train's scene in the film (56:58) represents the film's most intense confrontation with collective trauma, turning the abstract fear of partition into terrifying reality. When the train arrives, people were waiting for their loves once. Instead, they witness an unbearable scene of death; the train filled with dead bodies. From a trauma theory viewpoint, the train symbolises national trauma, moving through the collective mind like a haunting memory that cannot be ignored. Cathy Caruth's idea of belatedness is evident here: trauma is not fully felt in the moment of violence but in its repeated, haunting return. The train's arrival is one such return—it brings the repressed fears of Partition to the forefront and forces them into the community's consciousness.

When Dil Nawaz sees the mutilated bodies of his sisters, his personal sorrow connects with the community's pain. The audience witnesses the collapse of his moral world through a close-up of his trembling face (58:35). From this moment on, Dil Nawaz symbolises Dominick LaCapra's idea of 'acting out'. He is caught in a cycle of trauma where the pain of loss is repeated through violence. His later attack on Shanta (1:39:50), the woman he once loved, is not just a personal act of cruelty; it represents revenge from one wounded community against another. In the climatic abduction scene, *Earth* reached its emotional and moral breaking point. Dil Nawaz, the man who once adored her, marks both her personal violation and the symbolic shattering of a shared moral order. Through Lenny's terrified gaze, the audience feels trauma as distance and disorientation. We witness the events but cannot intervene. Also, Lenny late realisation of her role in Shanta's abduction reflects Caruth's 'belatedness'.

Maurice Halbwachs notes that collective memory exists within social contexts like religion, class, and community. The scene where adult Lenny recalls her childhood in Lahore, transforms history into a remembered space. Lenny's family represents a neutral group, Parsi community, symbolising a delicate space of memory that watches but cannot act. Lenny's home turns into a small 'memory site' where private and public histories intersect. The train, a recurring element in partition stories, becomes what Aleida Assmann calls an 'archive of cultural trauma'. It serves as a symbolic vessel that carries the grief of generations.

The radio announcement scene (58:39) serves as a key moment when official history interrupts personal everyday life. The people were hearing about events through political filters, rather than experiencing them directly. The change reflects what Assmann describes as the shift from 'communicative memory' to 'cultural memory'. The announcement changed the dynamics; marking the psychological and emotional separation of friends into 'Hindu', 'Muslim' and 'Sikh'. In the film's final moments, the adult Lenny's confession, "It was I who pointed her out," changes the story from shared conflict into a personal exploration of guilt.

Lenny's adult mind re-experiences her childhood trauma, creating an inherited wound that influences her identity long after the event. The repeated memory of the scene, rather than its real-time occurrence, emphasises that the violence of Partition is not just a part of history but continues to affect those who remember.

IV.   PINJAR (2003): THE FEMININE WOUND OF PARTITION

Pinjar (2003), based on Amrita Pritam's well-known novel, is one of the most moving portrayals of the Partition of India. The film examines the breakdown of identity, faith, and belonging through the story of Puro, a Hindu woman. Her abduction by a Muslim man, Rashid, symbolises the violent division of the nation. Beyond its tale of personal pain, Pinjar stands out for its careful use of film techniques. The mise-en-scène, cinematography, sound design, and editing all work together to express the deep trauma of Partition on screen.

The narrative structure of the film follows the rules of a classical realist framework. Every event of the film unfolds in chronological order. At its heart, the film tracks the journey of Puro (Urmila Matondkar), a young Hindu woman. Her abduction by Rashid (Manoj Bajpayee), a Muslim man seeking revenge for past family wrongs, sparks a series of events that reflect the disruptions of Partition. The story unfolds in a straightforward manner, focusing on trauma and transformation. It is divided into three main parts: the idyllic life before Partition, the violent abduction and rejection, and the eventual reconciliation and acceptance of a changed identity. The used traditional storytelling methods; clear cause-and-effect, emotional resolutions, and moral questioning that fit with melodrama but rise above it through the film's historical context.

The use of mise-en-scene, which refers to the arrangement of visual elements within a frame, effectively conveys the themes of loss, confinement, and identity. Each object, colour, and space in the film reflects Puro's inner feelings and the broader social turmoil triggered by Partition. In the initial scenes, the wide shots of large golden-coloured fields signify peace and stability in the pre-partition India. However, as the violence starts, the same places become barren, indicating how the land itself becomes a witness to trauma. The shift from open spaces to closed space mimics Puro's confinement. This physical confinement mirrors her emotional imprisonment and loss of freedom. Costumes also play an important role in the film's mise-en-scène. Puro's transformation is shown through her clothing. In the early scenes, she wears bright Punjabi outfits, which symbolise youth and joy. After her abduction, her clothes change to dull, earthy tones, reflecting her inner despair and forced transformation. Through mise-en-scene, every frame reflects the emotional state of the characters and the historical reality of Partition.

The opening sequence of *Pinjar* shows an image of peace and harmony in pre-Partition Punjab. Puro moving freely in the fields and the sounds of Punjabi folk songs reflects on the time where identity was based on the land, family and culture not religion. However, the peaceful image shatters when Rashid abducts Puro (35:36). The abduction is more than just one woman's tragedy; it signals the start of a shared crisis where old relationships, values, and feelings of safety fall apart. The scene where Puro returns to her parents (01:08:38) is one of the film's most powerful emotional moments. It shows how collective trauma spreads through social and moral spaces. Instead, her family rejects her (01:09:50), fearing that welcoming her back will shame their reputation. This rejection turns Puro's personal tragedy into a symbol of shared denial. Halbwachs' theory of collective memory helps us understand this moment more clearly. He argues that communities form shared memories by holding on to what preserves their identity and forgetting what threatens it.

Puro's silence in *Pinjar* is one of the most powerful expressions of trauma in the film. After being abducted and turned away by her family, she loses her voice; not just in a literal sense but also emotionally and socially. Her silence shows a deep inner wound that remains unspoken. Sigmund Freud noted that when the mind faces an unbearable experience, it often pushes it away to avoid pain. Puro's quietness is not a sign of weakness; it is a psychological defence. Puro's silence represents more than her personal pain; it symbolises the shared silence of women during Partition. Thousands of women faced abduction, rape, or displacement, yet society erased their stories from history. Puro's silence, then, speaks for those women who suffered without a voice

In the climax, Puro choses to stay in Pakistan with Rashid (03:04:23), marks major change in her journey. Throughout the film, Puro has faced many hardships. She has been abducted, rejected by her family, and caught between two communities torn apart by hate. But in this last moment, she turns her pain into purpose. By helping Lajjo, she symbolically saves another woman from the fate she experienced herself. This choice shows that Puro is no longer just a victim of her trauma; she finds meaning in it instead. According to Dominick LaCapra's theory, people deal with trauma in two ways. They can either 'act out', where they stay stuck in a cycle of pain, or 'work through' where they confront and understand the trauma. Puro's choice represents 'working through' because she stops passively reliving her suffering and instead takes action to create something positive from it.

When Rashid kidnaps Puro, it represents personal trauma and serves as a symbol of territorial loss. Puro's body reflects the nation's body, which is being violated and divided. It aligns with Cathy Caruth's idea of trauma as 'an unclaimed experience' something that resists being shown and comes back through repetition. Another scene where Puro's family refuses to accept her, shows the collective denial and repression of traumatic events. It is a visual representation of Halbwachs' idea that collective memory depends on social frameworks. Rashid's transformation from abductor to a man haunted by guilt shows his struggle to reconcile memory and moral responsibility. It represents Caruth's idea of "belatedness," where trauma comes back not as memory but as a haunting presence. Through Rashid, the film examines collective guilt, the moral consequences that go beyond individual wrongdoers and involve communities and nations. The ultimate of Puro to stay with Rashid connects

with Aleida Assmann's idea of addressing cultural trauma; it's not about erasing it, but changing memory into a way of making peace.

Pinjar goes beyond a personal story to become a powerful exploration of cultural memory and trauma. Through Puro's journey, the film reconstructs the shared pain of Partition, turning individual suffering into a symbolic representation of the nation's divided consciousness.

V.   CONCLUSION

The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most significant and painful moments in the subcontinent's history. Indian cinema has played an important role in keeping this event alive for future generations. Over the decades, filmmakers have revisited Partition not only as a historical event but also as a lasting cultural scar that influences the nation's collective identity. This study has explored how Hindi cinema, through its storytelling, visual style, sound, character development, and symbols, has depicted the pain, loss, and upheaval caused by Partition. It has also acted as a way for people to remember together. The depiction of Partition in Hindi cinema is not just about recording history. It is about understanding how collective pain transforms into collective memory. Through film, these works ensure that Partition is neither forgotten nor reduced to a political event. Instead, it is remembered as a human tragedy that continues to influence the moral and emotional landscape of modern India.

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