PARTITION CINEMA: A STUDY

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In the three decades following Partition, both explicit and implicit representations of the trauma, pain, violence and suffering associated with Partition is shown in cinema of 1949-50, 1953-54, the early 1960s and 1973. The films fall into four approximate groups: (1) commercial Hindi films of the 1950s and the early 1960s; (2) leftist Bengali films of the 1950s; (3) Ritwik Ghatak’s films from the early 1960s; and (4) M.S. Sathyu’s landmark film Garam Hawa (1973), which constitutes a category in and of itself.

Among the few commercial Hindi films that address the trauma are Lahore (1949), Apna Desh (1949), Firdaus (1953), Nastik (1954), Chhalia (1960), Amar Rahe Yeh Pyar (1961), Dharamputra (1961), as many as three revolve around abducted women. The two Bengali films, Chhinnamul (1950) and Natun Yahudi (1953) have their roots in a leftist cultural scene. These films address the dislocation and subsequent problem of rehabilitation of the East Bengali refugees. Sathyu’s Garam Hawa deals with two major historical currents: the rekindling of Partition memories during the 1971 Bangladesh War, and the onset of a period of national reflection whose cinematic signpost was the so-called New Indian Cinema.

Partition Cinema deals with concerns like statehood and legitimacy, future of community life, religious difference, autonomous subjectivity, women’s agency, mass displacement, and rehabilitation. It deals with characters like righteous but crisis-prone patriarchs, unwed mothers, disoriented refugees; settings like trains and railway stations, mosques and temples, refugee colonies and alienating urban spaces. (Sarkar, Mourning the Nation, 169-170)

Nastik and Dharamputra as films present communal violence in brief, stylized scenes, the shift from a realist to a consciously presentational mode sidestepping ethical problems associated with screen representations of brutality still raw in popular memory. Lahore presents the difficulties of representing violence formally in terms of a blank screen. Released within two years of the truncation, this film shifts away from the brutality to focus on the subjective dimensions of human suffering.

Apna Desh and Chhalia present more flesh-and-blood, and hence more conflicted, women protagonists form some kind of bond with their Muslim abductor (Apna Desh) or benefactor (Chhalia). When they try to return to their families, they face troubled resistance, even outright rejection. Caught between two antagonistic worlds, the women experience a
deep crisis of identity: homeless and abandoned in a most profound sense, they belong nowhere. The protagonist of Chhalia finds refuge with two underworld criminals – one Muslim, the other Hindu – on both sides of the new border. The film appears to suggest that compared to the state, the lumpen classes are more compassionate, and more equipped from their daily struggles to negotiate social anarchy. Eventually the family and the national community are held up as a woman’s proper refuge.

Chhinnamul and Natun Yahudi, two Bengali films sought to document the plight of East Bengali refugees and to present their rehabilitation as a national problem. In spite of their exploration of pressing contemporary issues such as the material and psychic dimensions of displacement, and the socio-economic tensions in the wake of the political division, both films failed at the box office. Yet, while Chhinnamul has been canonized by the critical establishment, Natun Yahudi has, for all practical purposes, been forgotten. Chhinnamul captures the trauma of getting uprooted from one’s ancestral home, both naturalized and sacralized by generations of forefathers.

In September 1948, Filmindia magazine described Muslims who remained in post-Partition India as “the living dead”: they were “orphans in their own land,” who were paying “for the sins of others”, that is to say, the “sins” of separatist Muslims. Garam Hawa represents the predicament of one such Muslim family of Agra. The film consists of a series of mostly still shots documenting the events surrounding Partition: a topographical map of South Asia, followed by a geopolitical map of undivided India; Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah and various other nationalist leaders; Mountbatten, the last viceroy; folk-dancers probably celebrating independence; map of divided India, with a separated Pakistan; a train full of refugees; overcrowded camps. This film still remains a remarkable cinematic attempt at what Adorno called “coming to terms with the past” – in showing the objective conditions that produced the religious strife and that continue to inscribe a post-Partition Muslim-Indian subjectivity. (Sarkar, Mourning the Nation, 171-199)

Moving on to the three Ritwik Ghatak films that came to be regarded retrospectively as his Partition trilogy, namely, Meghe Dhaka Tara (Cloud-Capped Star) which centers on Neeta, the eldest daughter of a Bengali family uprooted by Partition trying to eke out a living in a suburban refugee colony. Having lost her family in the riots of 1946, Anasuya, the female protagonist of Komal Gandhar seeks to overcome her isolation by joining the vibrant group theater scene. Subarnarekha strikes a darker note. Returning to the family as the site of a pitched struggle for meaning and mooring, Ghatak presents a picture of the post-Partition
milieu that is at once more disturbing and more utopian than the one in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. Ghatak in this Partition trilogy practically echoes Walter Benjamin:

“To articulate the past historically… means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”

Looking back in history is not simply a matter of nostalgic reverie for Ritwik Ghatak, it mobilizes a process of anamnesis, whereby the willful forgetting of inconvenient experiences is reversed and “lost” memories are restituted to a community. As Ghatak himself points out:

“We are an epic people. We like to sprawl, we are not much involved in story-intrigues, we like to be re-told the same myths and legends again and again. We, as a people, are not much sold on the ‘what’ of the thing, but the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of it. This is the epic attitude.”

Time and again, a sense of tremendous personal agony erupts into Ghatak’s socio-historical analysis. His obsessive returns to the moment of Bengal’s division, his compulsion to trace all social problems of the post-independence period back to the Partition, indicate the extent to which he was personally affected by it. Refusing to accept the official devaluation of Partition as a historical aberration and working against the general silence, he makes the seemingly ungrievable crisis the tenacious core of his cinematic project.

(Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation*, 201-227)

Four decades after Partition, a five-hour-long television miniseries titled *Tamas* showed the trauma suffered by the common men during Partition. Presented by the state-owned television network Doordarshan and directed by the reputed “parallel cinema” filmmaker Govind Nihalini, *Tamas* exposes the political intrigues that led to unimaginable sufferings. Bhisham Sahni started working on his Hindi novel *Tamas* in 1971, the year Bangladesh was born through yet another round of civil war and geopolitical truncation in South Asia. The six part miniseries was based on the novel, and two other short stories by Sahni – *Sardarni* and *Zahud Baksh*. According to Sahni, the series creators did not aim to reopen old wounds and reawaken dormant hostilities, or to hold any particular community responsible for the mayhem; rather, they hoped to expose the communal forces that led to the Partition and to call attention to their continued operation in contemporary India. Nihalani was interested in analyzing contemporary conditions through the lens of Partition. It provided a good historical backdrop. It was an attempt to rewrite national history from the ground of ambivalence and subaltern (victims) remains its vantage point. *Tamas* also goes to great lengths to uphold humanist values that bind people together and function as the cement of community. It projects ordinary people as the repository of common sense and humanity. It
reserves its most trenchant criticism for religious fanatics. It squarely holds religious fundamentalism responsible for sowing the seeds of loathing and violence among otherwise innocent people, transforming into vicious brutes.  
(Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation*, 231-242)


Partition Cinema, as a whole, shifts the spotlight from the domain of High Politics – both of British Empire and Nationalist Leadership and focuses its attention on the ‘history of people’ – a history through which people remember and make sense of the experience from “below”. This approach derives its force from the premise that nationalist and state-building projects involve substantial fabrications and contestations and cannot be thought of as grand “political” mechanisms isolated from a more diffused cultural realm. Partition Cinema is an attempt to give voice to the post-Partition silence and locating this very silence as both a portent and a precondition for the subsequent discursive eruption. On one hand, it laments over the loss of *Akhand Bharat* and on the other it upholds the dignified human values and the supreme acts of sacrifice done out of love and compassion for the whole humanity.

References