

Bodies as Battlefields: Feminist Readings of Partition in South Asian Screen Adaptations

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Abstract:

This paper examines the gendered subjugation and structural violence inflicted upon women during the 1947 Partition by analysing two screen adaptations: Deepa Mehta's film *Earth 1947* (1999) and Haissam Hussain's television drama *Dastaan* (2010). Based on Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *Cracking India* and Razia Butt's novel, *Bano*, respectively. Both narratives are situated in the immediate aftermath of the creation of Pakistan. I argue that these screen texts centre women's bodies as primary sites of historical testimony, exposing the structural complicity of both Indian and Pakistani nationalist projects in silencing women's trauma. Ultimately, this analysis highlights how the systemic suppression of female suffering is routinely reproduced by mainstream cinema, but actively resisted and made visible through parallel cinema.

Keywords: Gendered Violence, Screen Adaptations, Structural Complicity, South Asian Cinema, Partition

"They carried all the things that they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for a terrible power of the things they carried".

–Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

The 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent triggered unprecedented mass displacement, bringing profound psychological trauma alongside immense material devastation. Filmmakers and writers across the border have sought to capture this immense suffering, documenting the specific horrors witnessed by both displaced refugees and those left behind. In this paper, it is observed that two such screen texts, Deepa Mehta's *Earth 1947* (1999) and Haissam Hussain's *Dastaan* (2010), examine the gendered subjugation of women and the structural violence inflicted on their bodies and psyches during the crisis of Partition.

Both *Earth 1947* and *Dastaan* deploy women's bodies as primary sites of historical testimony, exposing the structural complicity of both Indian and Pakistani nationalist projects in the suppression of women's suffering, a suppression that mainstream cinema reproduces and parallel cinema resists. Both chosen texts are cinematic or dramatic adaptations of literary works. *Earth 1947* is Deepa Mehta's cinematic adaptation of Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *Cracking India* (published in the US as *Ice-Candy-Man*), while *Dastaan* is a dramatization of Razia Butt's novel, titled *Bano*. Both the narratives are situated during partition and in the immediate aftermath of the creation of Pakistan.

Women characters with their vulnerable bodies are central to both these narrativisations. In Mehta's cinematic adaptation of *The Ice-Candy-man*, the title change to *Earth* reflects the cartographic and territorial ruptures effected by Partition; the land itself, not just its people, is figured as a body that is divided. This change comes from a realisation that *Ice Candyman*, though an important figure in the movie, is only a lurking shadow in the lives of Lenny Sethna, an eight-year-old Parsi girl from whose point of

view the story is told, and her Hindu care-taker, Shanta, whose body becomes a site of adoration, jealousy and revenge for her Muslim friends.

In *Dastaan*, violence on women's bodies is used as a weapon of war to weaken the will of the opposition. Women, hence play a pivotal role in both the narratives. They offer a microcosmic study into the tumultuous time of the history of the subcontinent. Rather than offering an autobiographical account of prominent figures, both works are fictional representations of 'ordinary' people's experience, and it is precisely this ordinariness that renders their testimony of structural violence so politically significant. *Dastaan* follows Hassan, a Muslim League supporter in Amritsar, and his fiancée Bano, whose body becomes the primary site on which the violence of Partition is inscribed.

Drawing on Hayden White's notion of the "fictions of factual representation," these works can be positioned as counter-narratives to the official meta-narrative of the postcolonial state, narratives that recover what nationalist historiography systematically suppresses. As Hayden White states:

"The aim of the writer of a novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history. Both wish to provide a verbal image of "reality." The novelist may present his notion of this reality indirectly, that is to say, by figurative techniques, rather than directly, which is to say, by registering a series of propositions which are supposed to correspond point by point to some extratextual domain of occurrence or happening, as the historian claims to do. But the image of reality which the novelist (a fiction writer) thus constructs is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less "real" than that referred to by the historian."

Separated by Partition, Hassan in Rawalpindi, Bano stranded in Amritsar, the two fiancés embody what the newly drawn border does most efficiently: it severs the intimate. Bano's subsequent trajectory functions as a condensed cartography of Partition's gendered violence. She witnesses the massacre of her entire family by Hindu and Sikh rioters; her mother is raped and murdered in front of her eyes. Captured while attempting to flee 'new' India, she is raped repeatedly and held captive by Basant Singh, the patriarch of a Sikh household in Kapurthala, who coerces her into marriage.

In Elaine Scarry's terms, the tortured body becomes the very site on which power inscribes itself. Bano's body is made to testify, against her will, to the dominance of the aggressor and the failure of the state that could neither protect nor recover her. The son she bears, Bhagat Singh, is experienced not as a child but as a biological index of violation, a spitting image of his "rapist father", pointing to what Menon and Bhasin identify as the forced maternity imposed on abducted women: a secondary dispossession layered onto the primary one of rape.

Five years later, Basant Singh's death opens a narrow aperture of escape. Bano's arrival in Pakistan, her kissing the word 'Pakistan' inscribed on a train, collecting soil, dancing in ecstasy, is rendered with the iconography of homecoming, yet it is deeply ironic. The nation she greets as utopia is precisely the one that failed to retrieve her. Her kiss is less an act of patriotism than a desperate re-inscription of self onto a geography that had, for five years, been withheld from her. Anderson's "imagined community" is here made viscerally, bodily real, but for a woman whose body the nation never came to claim.

Hassan, now betrothed to a distant cousin, Rabia, breaks his engagement upon encountering Bano, but reunion is not a resolution. Bano remains caught in traumatic recursion, repeating the names of her perpetrators, unable to inhabit the present. Her PTSD is compounded by Hassan's mother, who brands her 'impure' for her years in a Sikh household. Instead of offering refuge, the domestic space replicates the logic of communal contamination. The family becomes a second theatre of violation, this time through the violence of stigma.

The nation-state and the family, together, complete the systemic erasure of Bano as a subject with legitimate claims to dignity, belonging, and recovery that the rioters initiate. The literature of partition is inherently characterised by violence, but depicting a narrative via a woman's lens subverts these set constructs and reveals that events such as partition were not only about physical violence and brutal killings, but also about the mental trauma and long-lasting impact on those 'left' alive.

Since sexual violence was such a huge part of the violence inflicted on women, women were subject to this trauma in many more ways than men. Claudia Preckel notes, "Approximately seventy-five thousand women became victims of sexual violence, rape and abduction. The wounds of these violent events have not completely healed even to the present day. Partition has, in some cases, continued to be a national trauma and a personal tragedy for some women, one that still cannot be discussed publicly or in private". Amrita Pritam, whose poem *Ajj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu* (1947) remains the defining literary lament of Partition's violence against women, writes: "There are so many stories which are not written on paper, they are written in the bodies and minds of women".

This paradox, of simultaneous hyper-visibility and erasure, is central to the two screen texts under analysis. Women's bodies are made spectacularly visible as sites of communal contest, while their interiority, trauma and agency are rendered systematically invisible by the nationalist archive. The newly formed post-colonial nations of India and Pakistan are put to test in *Dastaan*, where they are seen failing in materialising the promises of the revolution. Bano reaches Pakistan with a hope of finding 'honest' Pakistanis, all her 'brothers'. Her illusion is shattered as she finds dishonesty in people and when one of her 'brothers' tries to rape her. In her traumatic psyche where rape is associated with Basant Singh only, she visualises Basant Singh and ends up killing the person, marking her triumph over India and completing her revenge on the already dead Basant Singh.

Rape functions here as a war trope: sexual violence perpetrated on the women of the opposing community simultaneously dishonours that community's men and asserts the dominance of the aggressor. This logic, analysed extensively by scholars such as Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in *Borders and Boundaries* (1998), frames women's bodies as the territorial property of their community, their violation equivalent to the conquest of land. This notion, sustained by the ever-prevalent patriarchy in both the nations of India and Pakistan leads to another, often over-looked, dimension of honour-killing during partition.

When Sikhs attack Bano's house in Amritsar and every family member anticipates the impending violence, Faheem, Bano's brother asks his mother to strangle Bano. He calls out, "Bibi, Bano ka gala gott de" (Mother, strangle Bano), fully aware that everyone is going to die, but that Bano's death will inevitably be preceded by rape. The chilling detail here is that he does not try to save her life, only to pre-empt her rape. Honour, in this patriarchal logic, is located not in a woman's survival but in the male community's control over her body, even to the point of death. This is what Menon and Bhasin describe as "martyrdom by the family": women killed by their own kin to forestall violation by the other, an act framed as protection but functioning as a further dispossession of female agency.

In *Earth* 1947, sexual violence is rendered with devastating synecdoche. A train arrives from Amritsar carrying women's dismembered body parts, severed breasts packed into luggage. The image is not incidental. Mehta uses it to make visible what official Partition histories rendered unspeakable. Ice-Candy-Man's sister is killed in the same manner, and his response, kidnapping Shanta and forcing her into prostitution, completes a cycle of retributive sexual violence, a Hindu body exchanged for a Muslim body. What is important analytically is that both the original act and its "revenge" deploy women's bodies as

currency in a transaction between men. The women themselves are entirely absent as subjects from this exchange.

These incidents, filtered through the traumatised memory of eight-year-old Lenny, constitute Mehta's central formal strategy: a child's limited but morally uncorrupted point of view exposes the grotesque irrationality of communal violence that adult narrators might rationalise or suppress.

Women in Deepa Mehta's *Earth 1947* occupy what Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her foundational theorisation of intersectionality (1989), identifies as distinct "intersectional locations", positions shaped not by any single axis of identity but by the simultaneous operation of multiple social categories. Crenshaw's framework, developed to account for how race, gender, and class compound one another in structuring vulnerability, translates with striking precision to the communal geography of Partition Lahore, where religion, class, age, and gender converge to determine a woman's exposure to sexual violence.

Shanta, the nanny, occupies the most precarious intersectional position: she is youthful, Hindu in a Muslim-majority Lahore, and employed as domestic labour, placing her firmly within the lower working class. Each of these categories independently increases her vulnerability. Their intersection multiplies it exponentially. Lenny, by contrast, is insulated by a comparatively safer intersectional location: she is a child, upper-class kid and a Parsi (neutral to the cause of independence).

Lenny's mother is also safer than Shanta because of her class and religion. She explains the Parsi community's survival strategy to Lenny: they must be "like sugar in milk," present but invisible, sweet but without distinct form. This metaphor denotes that the Parsi subject achieves safety through the dissolution of identity, a survival tactic that implicitly critiques the violent consequences of communal visibility. Mehta uses this to ironise the very notion of communal identity as a fixed, legible marker that makes bodies targetable. In a film about communal violence predicated on legible religious identity, the Parsi woman's safety is purchased at the cost of self-erasure.

In the contestation of developing an official narrative for their nation states, both India and Pakistan, almost sideline the perspective of women and their suffering. Partition hardly finds cinematic representation in box-office driven mainstream cinema. It is almost always, like other sensitive issues, a part of alternative, often referred to as 'parallel' cinema. *Earth 1947* is one of the least known movies of the Bollywood 'perfectionist' Aamir Khan. One of the only ways that mainstream Bollywood refers to the Indo-Pak relations and partitions is through the 'love across the border' trope.

This category involves Kabir Khan's *Ek Tha Tiger*, Yash Chopra's *Veer Zara*, Rajkumar Hirani's *PK*, Eeshwar Niwas's *Total Siyaapa*, Mudassar Aziz's *Happy Bhaag Jayegi* and Anil Sharma's *Gadar*. While there have been other movies that feature Pakistan, they almost always feature Pakistan in a negative role or as the lesser significant 'other'. Films referring to Indo-Pak reconciliation also gain popularity subject to the political relationships between the two nations. This category includes movies such as Kabir Khan's *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, Farah Khan's *Main Hoon Na* and Yash Chopra's *Veer-Zaara*.

The fact that movies referring directly to partition, such as *Tamas* and *Earth 1947*, find their existence only in parallel cinema is telling of the sensitivity of the issue as well as the reception of these movies as true or false representations of the events of the partition. Unlike the Holocaust, which has generated an extensive transnational infrastructure of memorialisation, from Yad Vashem to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Partition has, until very recently, produced no equivalent state-sponsored commemorative architecture. The Partition Museum in Amritsar, inaugurated in 2017, marks a significant if belated exception; yet its limitations are telling: it is community-funded rather than state-sponsored,

located exclusively on the Indian side of the border, and reliant on oral testimony and donated artefacts rather than official archival recognition.

Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "absence" and "loss" is instructive here: where the Holocaust has been institutionally processed as a historical "loss" demanding public mourning and accountability, Partition trauma has been consigned to what LaCapra would call the register of "absence", an unprocessed wound that resists symbolic representation and therefore persists as private, ungovernable grief. Partition thus remains, in the main, a matter of private memory carried in the bodies and testimonies of survivors and their descendants, rather than a publicly acknowledged, collectively mourned national catastrophe. In a scenario, where partition becomes a sensitive topic, violence on women's bodies becomes almost a taboo subject. Very few directors take the risk of indulging in such narrativizations at the risk of upsetting their ticket-buying audience.

Apart from the violence perpetrated on women by the men of other communities and honour killings by their own family members, a large number of female suicides were witnessed in affected parts of Lahore and Punjab. A large number of women jumped into wells to save their and their family's 'honour' by escaping sexual assaults. This brings into question the female agency and how female agency in cases such as these is evidently informed by patriarchal constructs.

In *Dastaan*, Bano participates in Muslim League activities, but her participation is circumscribed: women make posters, hold discussions in closed rooms, and are grateful to bring tea for the men deliberating over the nation's fate. They have no role in decision-making and initiate no independent political action. This depiction is significant: the women who will bear the greatest bodily cost of Partition are the very ones excluded from its planning. Their exclusion from the political process and their centrality to its violence are not incidental but structurally linked.

Both India and Pakistan absorbed women's bodies as "collateral damage" while simultaneously encoding the nation itself as a female body, "Bharat Mata" being the most prominent example. This contradiction is not incidental but foundational: the nation is feminised and venerated as a mother-goddess, while actual women are instrumentalised and sacrificed in her name. Partha Chatterjee's analysis of nationalist discourse in *The Nation and Its Women* (1989) illuminates this precisely: the "spiritual" or "inner" domain of the nation is coded feminine, requiring protection, while the material and political domain is coded masculine, requiring action. Women's bodies become the contested boundary of the nation, requiring defence, recuperation, or destruction to preserve communal honour.

To invoke Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983): the very act of imagining these new nations as coherent entities required a suppression of the violence through which they were constituted, and it was women's bodies on which that constitutive violence was most legibly inscribed. Are these acts simply to be brushed aside as a collateral damage for the greater social cause of larger brotherhood- albeit in this case two different brotherhoods? Both the nations seem to have set aside the case of women atrocities in popular historiography of modern history of respective states just like Anderson talks about Europeans setting aside past fratricides for larger identity. This example also highlights the fact that the concept of nation-state is a European import to the Indian subcontinent where otherwise they have always lived in small principalities throughout much of history.

The lived memories of Partition's women survivors do not disappear with their deaths. Unarchived in state museums and unacknowledged in official historiography, they persist as what Marianne Hirsch terms "postmemory", transmitted across generations not as direct recollection but as haunting, affective inheritance. The screen texts analysed here participate precisely in this transmission: Mehta and Hussain

restore to cultural memory what the nationalist projects of India and Pakistan required to be forgotten. Yet these restorations circulate without resolution, without justice, and without the institutional acknowledgement owed to the communities, Punjabi and Bengali, on both sides of borders drawn in haste, who bore the full weight of Partition's violence.

What these screen texts ultimately make visible is the gap between two kinds of national memory: the official archive, which abstracts and suppresses, and the testimonial counter-archive, which restores specificity, interiority, and the faces of the women whom Partition's violence erased. As Amrita Pritam wrote, there are stories not written on paper but in the bodies and minds of women. It is the work of counter-cinema and counter-narrative, of texts like those examined here, to ensure those stories are not finally, irrevocably lost.

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