



PARTITION, 1947: THROUGH THE LENS

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ABSTRACT

One of the most painful, violent and traumatic times in the history of this nation was the partition of 1947. It was a bleak time for the Indian sub-continent where both kindness and barbarity of the human race were put to test; it's hard to say which won. As a general rule of thumb we assume that love triumphs hate but practically it is much easier to propagate hate, especially at a time of political upheaval and communal tensions. Such are the times when moral ambiguity gives rise to violence both physical and psychological inflicted upon men and women alike. But the violence practiced against the two genders differs in bounds. Men are usually subjected to physical violence like killing but women are subjugated to both mental and physical violence, being abducted, raped, mutilated and the like. The fairer sex is usually left at the mercy of men. The terrible heart-wrenching stories of the partition have found their voice in literature and cinema reminding humanity of its darker times. Chandra Prakash Dwivedi's 2003 film, Pinjar and Deepa Mehta's 1998 film, 1947 Earth are two such movies that leave the audience shaken and awed. Both the movies are set against the background of India-Pakistan partition and the violence that engulfed the country at the time. This paper attempts to explore the social chaos, political unrest, communal violence that was left in the aftermath of partition and the kind of suffering women endured at the hands of this tragedy by analysing these two films.

KEYWORDS: Sectarian violence, violence against women, partition of India

INTRODUCTION

The arbitrary line the British would draw to carve up India in 1947 would scar the continent forever. (Earth)

The August of 1947 brought in a new era of violence, brutality and destruction, all in the name of God. Different sects who had been living together peacefully for centuries, who fought collectively against the British Raj, all of a sudden these people were scattered and bickering like small children. Neighbour did not trust neighbour, friends turned into foes and people who'd known each other forever brutally killed each other, such was the India left in the wake of the "so called" Independence. Doubts replaced love and companionship, cruelty replaced kindness, survival replaced compassion and fear replaced reason. British divided the sub-continent along religious lines. The districts of Punjab and Bengal with Muslim majority became Pakistan and East Pakistan respectively and the areas where Hindu population was in majority became a part of the new India. The genocide that was committed during this bloody era was similar to the Holocaust of Jews in

Germany. The people of one religion wanted to wipe out people of the other faith in both the newly formed countries. The transfer of population was not without trial, people would attack trains, busses and caravans. The police and army did as much as they could to ensure the safety of people but barbarism won over all at the time. Revenge, fear, madness took over people and thus mass murder was somehow justified. Chaos reigned over the land giving birth to the most inhuman humans. While men were murdered, women were usually subjected to a fate worse than death; they were kidnapped, raped, impregnated, tortured, kept, sold and rejected by people of both the religions. So women are doubly victimised by the people of the other faith and then rejected by their own. The dreadful stories of partition have found their voice in arts and literature. Novels like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, Intizar Hussain's *Basti*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* and Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* are some of the stories that have tried describing the agony of partition on paper through different perspectives



giving an insight into the impact it had on the population. Cinema has also attempted to convey the horror of partition through films like “Garam Hawa”, “Pinjar”, “Earth”, “Gadar: Ek Prem Katha” and “Hey Ram” by capturing the sectarian violence that plagued the state and its effects on the population by telling stories focused on a few characters.

Over one million people were killed during India's division. Seven million Muslims and five million Hindus and Sikhs were uprooted in the largest and most terrible exchange of population known to history. (Earth)

While the written word paints a picture on paper, movies bring those pictures to life on screen to convey the story in a more influential manner through the combination of audio-visual techniques. Both print and visual media have their own merits. By presenting the story of a microcosmic group or an individual, the universal is represented in films like “Earth” and “Pinjar”.

EARTH (1998)

Deepa Mehta's film “Earth” is her adaptation of Bapsi Sidhwa's 1988 novel, *Ice Candy Man*. The film deals with the partition of India and its aftermath by presenting the events unfolding in the city of Lahore. The story is about a love triangle among the *ayah* (nanny), Shanta, a masseuse, Hassan and the ice candy man, Dil Nawaz with the partition of India in the background. One of the main protagonists of the story is Lenny Sethna, she is a young crippled girl who is taken care of by Shanta. Lenny belongs to a rich Parsee family living in Lahore. The *ayah* is a beautiful woman who is admired by everyone in the group she socializes with at a park frequented by her and Lenny. This group is made up of a driver, a zookeeper, a gardener, a butcher, a masseuse and an ice candy man, a heterogeneous group of people from different religions. As the time of partition draws in close the group starts to disseminate. Butcher is the first one who becomes aggressive and starts acting like a Muslim fanatic. The atmosphere becomes grimmer as the city of Lahore is plunged into sectarian violence. The happy and poetic Dil Nawaz undergoes terrific transformation after witnessing the slaughter scene of the train coming from Gurdaspur, the one his sisters had boarded. Mob fights, mass murders, dislocation and conversion increase after this scene while the dialogues decrease and most communication is done through facial expressions and screams. The city seems to be on fire with various localities being burned down because of the ethnicity of the people residing there. With the horrors of partition in the background the love story progresses. Dil Nawaz after the death of his sisters asks Shanta to marry but she politely refuses because she only likes him but she loves Hassan. After rejection from Shanta, Dil Nawaz becomes a crueller version of himself; in a

dialogue he rebukes Hassan for being sympathetic and reveals his own angst, “*Kis tarah ka Musalman hai tu? Tu janna chahta hai toh sun, haan maine bahut saare Hinduo aur Sikho ke gharo mei grenade pheke hai, jinhe mai zindagi bhar jaanta tha. Mai toh apni bheneo ki kati hui ek ek chaati ke liye sab saalo ka khoon karna chahta hu*”(What kind of a Muslim are you? If you want to know, I'll tell you. I've thrown grenades at Hindus and Sikhs who I've known all my life. I want to kill everyone for each breast they cut off my sisters). Revenge and rejection drove a happy go lucky person to a heartless murderer. Hassan remains throughout a voice of reason, he urges again and again his friends to stick together and protect each other, and he even looks after the safety of his friend Sher Singh. While most Hindus migrate to India, others who choose to stay back convert to either Islam or Christianity like Hariya the gardener who converts to a Muslim and becomes Himmat Ali and the sweeper who adopts Christianity. Where people fought in the name of religion and chose to kill for it, people like Hariya abandoned their faith for the sake of survival as is aptly pointed out by the driver's dialogue, “*Jab humare dost hi humey maar dalna chahte hai toh humare pass raasta hi kya hai?*”(When our own friends want to kill us, we are left with few choices). The love between Shanta and Hassan grows and its consummation is accidentally witnessed by Dil Nawaz, his last shred of humanity is stripped away with it. Soon after this scene Hassan turns up dead and Lenny is tricked by Dil Nawaz to reveal the *ayah*'s hiding place, Shanta is then dragged out of the house by the frenzied mob and taken away while she keeps shouting for help. Through the character of Shanta and other female characters, Deepa Mehta has conveyed the kind of doom and violence women were subjected to. Dil Nawaz's sisters weren't just killed, they were raped, their breasts were excised and then they were killed and so were the other females aboard that train. Such barbarity was done not only to bring shame to the women but also to humiliate the community they belonged to. In a patriarchal society a woman becomes fallen when she is raped or if she has sexual relations before marriage as in the case of Shanta. Dil Nawaz loses all his respect and love for Shanta when he sees her with Hassan; she only becomes a body for him, a body of a Hindu woman whom he hands over to a crazed Muslim mob. The camp near Lenny's house is for rape victims who have been described in the film as “*giri hui aurat*”(fallen women) by Lenny, the term she had heard someone else say. Through the dynamics of microcosmic group and the changes it undergoes the universal condition of the sub-continent at the time of partition is brilliantly displayed. Deepa Mehta has also exemplified how women are dehumanized and reduced to a body that they are denied ownership of. She has explicitly and



subtly alluded to violence that women were laid open to through rape and mutilation.

PINJAR (2003)

Amrita Pritam's 1950 Punjabi novel, *Pinjar*, was adapted as a film by the same name under the direction of Chandraprakash Dwivedi. In the film the director has taken up the subject of women being victimised by men to settle scores and to humiliate the "other" community. Thousands of women were abducted, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs to bring shame on their community, they were raped and murdered, forcefully converted and married and impregnated. They were often rejected by their former families on the grounds of being defiled and dishonouring the family. This ugly truth has been realistically presented in the film through the story of a Hindu woman, Puro, who is abducted by a Muslim man, Rashid Sheikh, with the partition of India as background and the sectarian violence that followed it. Puro belongs to a wealthy Hindu family living in Amritsar who visit their ancestral village to get her married. A few days before her marriage to Ramchand, a well-educated gentleman, Puro is abducted from the fields by Rashid on account of an ancestral feud between the families of Shahs and Sheikhs. Her parents are distraught but no one except her brother tries to look for her. Everyone stays put for the sake of the family's honour because a disgraced woman is as good as dead, Mohanlal, Puro's father, states his dilemma in a dialogue, "*Mil bhi gayi toh kaun byah karega ussey? Kaha ussey sari zindagi kandhey par utha kar ghumta rahunga!*" (Even if we find her, no one will marry her and I will have to shoulder this responsibility throughout my life!). The story begins in 1946 where the country is on the verge of partition and therefore the atmosphere is charged with communal tensions. Even when Puro manages to escape once and goes to her parents, her parents beg her to leave because the whole village had Muslim majority and her family would have been killed for crossing the Sheikhs. So Puro is abandoned and rejected by her own family just because it is assumed that her body is defiled. Rashid takes Puro with him and marries her. He was a decent man who did such a horrendous act under the pressure of his family to exact revenge and because of his own love for Puro. He never touches her before marriage and treats her with respect and dignity. The newly married couple moves to a new village, there Puro is given a new Muslim name, Hamida, which is tattooed on her arm, the one she desperately tries to scrub but to no avail. Her roots, her identity and even her name are taken away from her. Puro might have accepted her fate but she does not do so silently, when she finds out of her pregnancy she says, "*Tera paap dhote dhote chaar mahine ho gaye hai*" (I have been carrying the burden of your sins for four months), this greatly hurts the ecstatic Rashid who

was having a child with the woman he loved. In a miscarriage, Puro loses the child and Rashid is devastated but the relations between the couple improve a bit. A mad woman in her village dies while giving birth; Puro and her husband bring the child home and care for him. But because the child's mother was a Hindu, he is taken away by the Hindus of the village and given to a sweeper who would not even care for him because it is not about the child but about hollow religion. Puro somehow makes peace with her condition but she longs to meet her brother, Trilok once, who is constantly haunted by his sister's memories. In order to extract some sort of revenge he burns Rashid's fields and all the produce is destroyed. Rashid actively tries to atone for his sins, he knew that Trilok turned his farm to ashes but he doesn't do anything, he just considers it a punishment for his crime. When Rashid reveals this information to Puro, she says, "*Usne ek baar bhi ye nahi socha ki uski behen ka kya hoga?*" (He didn't even once think what would be the consequence of his actions on his sister?). She is again a victim of men's rivalry, for the sister's financial condition is jeopardised. Partition takes place and strips Puro off her last sense of identity because her village ends up in the newly formed Pakistan. Despite everything, Puro still remains strong in the face of adversity. Ramchand and his family are forced to vacate their home and migrate to India because of the rampant killing of Hindus at the hands of Muslims. The caravan is attacked by some Muslims and his sister, Lajo, is abducted. Ramchand is distraught but Puro promises him that she would find his sister who was married to her own brother Trilok. Puro with the help of Rashid rescues Lajo and takes her to Lahore where she meets her own brother and Ramchand. Trilok urges Puro to return to India where she could begin a new life with Ramchand but she refuses returning back to her husband, the man she had come to love. Puro might have been a helpless victim to fate but she did help as many people as she could. Through the story she is empowered from a submissive victim to a hero. She saved another Hindu woman she found in the fields who had been abducted by Muslims and pimped out to different men every night, the mad woman's child and Lajo. Puro's dialogue, "*Iss yug mei ladki ka janam lena hi paap hai*" (It is sinful for a woman to even take birth in the era), aptly captures the pathetic condition of women of the time. Women like Puro and Rashid's aunt who were victims of family feuds were rejected by their own family, this alludes to the condition Sita was subjected in *Ramayana* and this is hinted in the film through the song Ramchand sings about Sita's exile and his reference to Puro as Janki and himself as Ram. No woman was safe, not even a mad woman who was impregnated by some anonymous person. The reduction of women to their bodies is appropriately conveyed through Puro's dialogue, "*Jiske pass na husna tha, na jawani. Bas*



mass ka ek sharer jisse apni sudh na ti, haddiyo ka ek pinjar, ek pagal pinjar, cheelo ne ussey bhi noch noch kar kha liya (She had youth or beauty, just a body, that knew no sense. Just a mangle of bones, another skeleton, the vultures have feasted on it too). Many women were abducted, raped and forced into prostitution while some were married and converted. Such was the gory condition of women at the time and Dwivedi has candidly represented the shameful reality in his film, "Pinjar".

CONCLUSION

Both "Pinjar" and "Earth" explore and illustrate the deplorable condition of women as the Indian sub-continent was plunged into sectarian violence resulting from the partition of 1947. "Earth" uses the metaphor of a woman's body to display the violence and partition that the sub-continent of India was subjected to. The way the women's bodies were mutilated and raped, in the same manner the land was torn into pieces and fought over for ownership. On the other hand, "Pinjar" presents the awful circumstances of women by using the metaphor of skeleton for women who are reduced to their bodies and their skeletons are like cages that entrap them. It deals with psychological torture, abduction, murder, rape, conversion, impregnation and forceful prostitution that women were imperilled to at the hands of the "other" community. "Earth" presents violence against the female body in the form of mutilation and rape committed by the members of opposing ethnicity. Both the films depict a realistic view of the hardships all the communities faced at the time of partition, the difficulty to migrate, the bloodshed, the incessant killing of people of different ethnic groups, looting and fanatic religious conformity. The way humanity and morals were compromised everywhere to establish political and religious supremacy is demonstrated in these films. "Earth" ends on a pessimistic note with Shanta being dragged away by a frenzied mob towards her doom while "Pinjar" ends on a more optimistic note of a society that has evolved enough to accept women like Lajo and Puro back into their former families as is pointed out by Trilok's dialogue when he urges Puro to return to India with him, "*Saari Hindu ladkiya apne apne ghar laut rahi hai*" (All Hindu women were returning to their homes), the ones that rejected such women earlier were finally embracing and accepting them. There is both good and evil in every human being irrespective of race and religion. The chaos of partition was so great that it brought forth the evil that lurked behind bars in everyone's heart, the universality of which is precisely expressed by Dil Nawaz in his dialogue, "*Ye sirf Hindu aur Musalman ki baat nahi hai. Ye toh kuch hum sab ke andar hai . . . hum sab janwar hai. Chidiyaghar ke uss sher ki tarah jisse Lenny baby itna darti hai, kaise pada rehta hai iss intezaar mei ki pinjara khule, aur jab pinjara*

khulta hai tab Allah hi malik hai." (This is not only about Hindus and Muslims. It's about what's inside us . . . we are all animals, like the tiger in the zoo Lenny baby is so scared of. It lies in the cage waiting for the door to open, and when it does, may God help us all).

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