Conclusion

I don’t know if cinema can actually bring about change in society. But cinema can certainly be a vehicle for creating social awareness. I believe in egalitarianism and every person’s awareness of human rights. Through my films I can say, “Here is the world, and here are the possibilities we have

Shyam Benegal

I think it’s slightly naive for me to think that films make a difference. But what it can do is start a dialogue and provoke discussion

Deepa Mehta

When Shyam Benegal and Deepa Mehta are talking about the function of cinema, to start a discussion and create awareness, they are invoking, according to Shyam Benegal, the ‘Magpie’ (Benegal 2002: 184) like quality of cinema to influence the people. Embedded in the categories of nation, religion and women, the cinematic texts taken up for analysis in this thesis have attempted to re-orient the viewers towards multiple realities about 1947 as against the parochial celebratory narratives of partition. Post colonial narratives like these revisions are triggered by exasperations with older interpretations which fail to encapsulate the entire picture. They rewrite history and help reclaim the voice of the common people lost in the melee of official narratives. They reject essentialist versions of history by portraying multiple realities. They seek to
locate the gaps within the official narratives by bringing out the contrast between official and personal memory. These multiple realities in these cinematic texts are often at odds with one another, however by embracing them and recreating the cinematic space, these texts align themselves with the revisionist narratives of partition that deals with the predicament of the common people especially women. A nation “cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of the ordinary people” (Hobsbawm 1991: 10). In doing so, these texts have to a certain degree have distanced themselves from the official narratives of 1947 to form newer grids of memory. They highlight the effects of decolonization on the subcontinent. This is perhaps best encapsulated by the older Lenny at the end of *Earth* when she wonders whether the end of British rule had brought about any positives. Negotiating the space between adhering to and distancing from the official narratives, these cinematic texts not only attempt to, borrowing Ritu Menon’s and Kamla Bhasin’s words, “make women a focus of the enquiry, a subject of the story, an agent of the narrative” (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 9), but through this focus on women, these texts also explores question of identity, of belonging, of statelessness and the circumstances leading to violence. By highlighting the impact of partition across time and space, the thesis has portrayed the highly complex nature of the partition phenomenon. The present can only be understood by analysing the circumstances and factors surrounding the original scar. It can also broaden our understanding of memory, history and representation. If not, then these texts can at least do as Benegal and Mehta have hoped, to start a conversation about the uncomfortable truths. Walking the tightrope between official and counter history and memory, these texts highlight how the official decisions impacted the common lives by focussing on the different kinds of
violence and the displacement brought about by the change of cartographic lines. The structural violence portrayed in the films is relevant to the contemporary world. The ever burgeoning popularity of Hindi films in the global arena amongst the diaspora as well as the global audience in general has ensured that these cinematic texts would provide a newer perspective for the global population too. Production of partition films like Deepa Mehta’s adaptation *Midnight’s Children* (2012) and Gurinder Chaddha’s *Viceroy’s House* (2017), in this decade itself, have ensured that the revision of 1947 is not over yet. This has also paved the way for further research in this field where films from other industries can also be taken up.

While the films have highlighted the experiences of women, they have also touched upon the male experiences and how it is different from that of the women. Both Trilok in *Pinjar* and Veero’s brother in *Khamosh Paani* are shown to be frantically searching for their abducted sisters. However, unlike the traumatic after effects and the difficulties which the women face – Pooro’s hallucinations and Veero’s inability to go to the well – the men are not shown exhibiting any such symptoms as they continue with their lives. In *Earth*, men are also shown to suffer physical abuse and this is portrayed through the character of Hari who is made to strip in front of a mob in order to prove his conversion. However in spite of this abuse, Hari can still live within mainstream society unlike the women who suffer abuse and are marked for life as “fallen women”.

The films have thrown open various lesser discussed aspects about partition. The first is the contrast between the pre-partition and post partition world as reflected in the films. The pre-partition world is one which is conceived by people as being free from any sort of disharmony. In *Earth*, this is portrayed through the shots of Shanta and her
group, sitting around the park or through the kite flying scene where people of all communities join together to take part in the kite flying festival. In *Pinjar*, the montages of the streets of Amritsar depict an insouciant world where people do not believe that the communal unrest would lead to a massive turmoil. In *Khamosh Paani*, the first flashback is filled with images of children playing around the well which is symbolic of a world devoid of any strife.

The films also depict how the communal conflict was used by people to settle their own personal grudges. In both *Earth* and *Pinjar*, this aspect has been highlighted as the physical violence on the women is committed not due to their religion but to settle personal grievances. Shanta’s abduction by the Muslim mob is led by Dil Nawaz who is consumed by revenge due to his rejection by Shanta and not because of her religion. Similarly Pooro’s abduction is due to a long standing feud between her family and that of Rashid who are business rivals. The communal conflict of the time makes it easier for him to carry out her abduction. The films show the continuity between the everyday violence inflicted on women and the extraordinary violence during partition. These instances showcase the multiple layers to the partition violence and how it cannot be simplified and pinned down only to religion.

Emphasis is also on the intra community violence on women. Both *Pinjar* and *Khamosh Paani* bring up the issue of how women were subjected to violence by their own communities. Pooro’s family refuses to accept her back as they fear retribution not only from their own community but also from the Muslim community. For Veero’s family in *Khamosh Paani*, the family’s honour is more important than the lives of their daughters and hence they are forced to jump into wells even though they themselves do
not desire it. The betrayal by their own communities was as gruesome as that by the other communities.

Reopening the saga of partition can work both ways: on the one hand, it can fill the gaps in the official narratives and in the process lead to sort of healing as most scholars have argued, or it could be used to legitimise newer forms of violence. In order to avoid the latter, the cinematic texts have tried to present a balanced perspective. The common thread in all these texts have been that they have done away with the privileging of one community over another. If in the film Earth, there is a Dil Nawaz who is fuelled by communal hatred, then there is also a Hasan who tries to save his Sikh friend. Again in Pinjar, there is Rashid who is fuelled by his guilt of committing the heinous crime, tries to make amends for it by not only marrying her but also treating her well. Not only that, he tries to defend Pooro’s brother in front of the people of his community after he burns down his crops, by saying to the others, “What else would he have done. Put yourselves in his position.” Not only that, he agrees to help Pooro to save Ramchand’s sister by going against people of his own community. These portrayals corroborate Ashis Nandy’s findings about how people from other communities helped one another. As against the narratives of hatred, these texts open an alternative portal where people moved beyond religious identity. In the same way, in Khamosh Paani Ayesha’s identity as a Sikh Women is kept hidden by her Muslim neighbours and they are the ones who are instrumental in her reunion with her brother. Like the character of Rashid in Pinjar, Ayesha’s husband, as depicted in her flashbacks, too is shown as a caring man with whom she rebuilds her life. Depictions of such instances, bring to the forefront the complexities inherent in the grand project undertaken by the two nation states to “recover” the abducted women through the
Abducted Persons Recovery Act which was, as discussed earlier, still formulated on the patriarchal notion of ‘women as nation/community/family’s honour’. Thus they portray the conflict between state policies and individual will.

These films not only revise the notion that partition was only about the all consuming hatred between two communities, but through such portrayals, these films chart a path comparatively less taken in the domain of Hindi cinema. In most popular Hindi films before the nineties, the narrative world revolved around the conflict between good and evil. However in the films in this thesis, the characters are not portrayed as totally negative or good. There is no reductive portrayal of members of any community, be it a Hindu or a Muslim. Moreover in most popular melodramatic films, a moral universe is depicted where the good always wins over evil. In these films however, no such resolution is achieved as the narratives they present show a world where there can be no victors as the films do not “aim for a sense of closure on what remains an essentially incomprehensible and therefore open past” (Sarkar 2010: 263). These films aim for preserving the memory of partition as a phenomenon which rather than resolving conflicts have made way for more.

Another thing to note is the choice of actors for these films. Mammo and Khamosh Paani do not have big stars. While, though Earth and Pinjar can boast of names like Aamir Khan and Urmila Matondkar respectively, the characters they portray in the films are different from the glamorous lives they are associated with. This is essential as the films revolve around the trials and tribulations of the common people. Thus to connect with the audience, this transformation is necessary.
The cinematic texts also depict the functioning of memory, about how it is a construct and can be influenced by various factors. In the film *Earth*, this is shown in the scene when all the characters are seen huddling around the radio, listening to Nehru’s speech. Just preceding the scene, there is the scene depicting the train from Lahore filled with bodies. The information about the train is relayed to Shanta and her group by their, as they sit listen to the independence speech. For Lenny, Shanta and the others, the memory of independence is riddled with violence and loss. The scene depicts the difference between official and personal memory. Not only can there be a difference between official and private memory, but the memory of individuals too can differ. In *Khamosh Paani*, how Ayesha and her brother remember the death of women from their own communities is different from how the other Sikh pilgrims narrate the same event. In the Sikh pilgrim’s narration, the women willingly embraced death rather than being captured by men of other communities. While in Ayesha’s flashback, we see her resisting the fate charted by family and in the process resists being constructed as her community’s symbol of honour. The difference in these two versions of the same event delineates the constructive nature of memory.

The importance of postmemory works in highlighting the varied experiences of partition has been discussed. *Mammo* and to some extent even *Earth*, though an adaptation, can be considered as postmemory works. Mehta has spoken about growing up listening to stories of partition and how it broke bonds between friends. Thus Sidhwa’s story of a young girl and her ayah living around the time of partition becomes the perfect framework to explore the issue of how friends can turn into enemies. This is done through the gradual marginalization of Shanta, seen through the eyes of Lenny, from being the centre of her group of friends till her abduction in the end. *Mammo* is
inspired by the story of screenwriter Khalid’s great aunt which discusses the disastrous consequence of state policies on individual lives. Her act of faking her death is her disavowal of state dictated concept of home.

The question of women’s agency has also been brought up in these texts. In *Earth*, Shanta’s act of choosing Hasan over Dil Nawaz has terrible consequences for her. In *Pinjar*, Pooro chooses to stay back with Rashid. However for that, Pooro must die for Hamida to continue to live with Rashid. In *Mammo* the only choice available for Mammo to beat the policies of the new nation states is to become invisible like a djinn by faking her death. For Ayesha/Veero, the choice of defying her family and choosing life over death during partition did not ensure a disappearance of her trauma as in the end she eventually had to choose death. Thus though in the films, the women are shown exercising their agency, but exercising their choice comes with a heavy price.

Two of the films – *Earth* and *Pinjar* taken up for discussion are adaptations. When a film is adapted, there are many factors which come into play. As discussed earlier, Mehta adds another layer to the issues discussed in the novel, by taking up the question of silencing of women in partition history. Unlike in the novel, the film ends with the abduction of Shanta thereby not only highlighting the fate of countless women unaccounted for inspite of the rehabilitation measures (which the novel takes up), but also the silencing of women’s perspective on partition. She also takes the concerns from the local to the global when she addresses the anatomy of violence which turns friends into foes. The film *Pinjar* reduces the concerns of the novel to focus chiefly on the events in and around partition.
These texts also focus on how the memories as well as effects of partition continue to have an impact on the everyday lives of the survivors as well as the subsequent generations who did not have firsthand experience of the trauma. *Mammo* and *Khamosh Paani* have highlighted how the complexities arising after the Partition of Punjab continue to haunt the landscape of the subcontinent as does the Partition of Bengal. For Mammo and Ayesha/Veero, the rigid boundaries of the nation states have created a condition of statelessness which “renders invisible other forms of belonging and processes in our modern world” (Zamindar 239). The fact that Mammo’s place of birth is India and that she has got relatives, will not ensure citizenship for her. For Veero on the other hand, her place in Pakistan is threatened when it is revealed that she is a Sikh woman. Even though she has embraced Islam and adapted to life in Pakistan, the exposure of her identity makes her an outsider in society, so much so that even the filial bond of mother and son cannot stand the test of communal hatred. For these women, the high politics of the new nation states continues to affect them in myriad ways so much so that the quest to belong remains an unattainable end. In the film *Earth*, the last shot of the film is of a grown up Lenny still grovelling under the mire of guilt for having betrayed her Ayah and for whom Partition was a phenomenon orchestrated by the British to create borders amongst communities. In the entire film, the perspective of the adult Lenny and her thoughts on the events of her childhood is brought out twice: once at the beginning when she tries to comprehend the meaning of division of the subcontinent and how it changed her life, by breaking a plate and towards the end of the film when she looks back on the partition as a metaphor for loss. Thus for Lenny, the trauma of partition makes it impossible for her to move past the event and hence it remains an unfinished chapter. Partition thus creates a permanent state of exile “that
damages the spirit, draining away the content of social and spiritual life. The void that remains in its place ... may never be filled” (Hossain xxii).

The logic that the division of the subcontinent would put an end to the communal hatred has been thwarted by the increasing communal clashes in the subsequent decades after partition. The destructive after affects of partition not only dictate state policies but also have the potential to create further divisions. The ways the divisive communal politics can still be used to manipulate people has been highlighted in Khamosh Paani. The film traces the genesis of the radical politics of the present to the partition of the subcontinent. The people of Charkhi are seen to be brainwashed by the maulvis and this is observed through a change in their behaviour towards the Indians pilgrims. Ayesha/Veero’s cautionary note to her son as to not get involved in political matters shows her understanding of the power of manipulation and the havoc it can create. The fallout such of radical indoctrination is seen through the breakdown of the relationship between Veero/Ayesha and her son and how her place in Charkhi is threatened after her identity is revealed and she is perceived as an outsider by the people amongst whom she had began a new life. Partition still resonates in the public and private sphere, affecting the tenets of secularism.

Through the focus on the stories of women, these cinematic texts have depicted narratives that have portrayed the multiples and complex layers to the partition phenomenon. Drawing out the effects of partition on the body and spirit, these texts question the logic which led to the creation of physical and psychological borders. The focus of these texts on the difficulties faced by the common people show that no lesson has been learned from the partition of the subcontinent. Such films highlight how the dangerous domain of communal politics can still impact the present. These texts not
only focus on the physical violence and structural violence on women during and long after partition but also on the stories of common people as both victims and perpetrators of the saga of violence, the factors behind the widespread bloodbath where even friends turned into foe. These films try to map the different aspects of the partition for a better understanding of how the violence and the displacement shape contemporary society. Negotiating between the demands of the market and a need to look at partition from the perspective of people from the margins, her/story adds to the domain of his/story. The women in the films personify the turbulence, upheaval and a sense of loss brought about by Partition. These images highlight how the nationalist reconfiguration of women as the nation was not to bestow them with any real privilege. The torture, abandonment and betrayal experienced by the women symbolise a land which have been broken. These cinematic texts are only a tip of the iceberg as there are numerous layers of partition that needs to be unearthed and analysed and as Benegal and Mehta had hoped would create awareness, initiate discussions and lead to further research.

**End Notes**

1 Quoted in the book, *Shyam Benegal* by Sangeeta Datta


3 These films do not “invoke 1947 to ... stir up patriotic fervour against Pakistan – and metonymically against Muslims in India. – in terms of an original betrayal ... that reduce the trauma to a palatable even entertaining commodity in terms of spectacle and music, manageable myths and definitive legends” (Sarkar 2010: 263)
“As Brain Mcfarlene writes, “Conditions within the film industry and the prevailing cultural and social climate at the time of the film’s making (when the film version does not follow hot upon the novel’s publication) are two major determinants in shaping any film ... one might include ... a director’s predilection or genre conventions, or the prevailing parameters of cinematic practice” (McFarlene 1996: 21)

Works Cited


**Films:**


*Earth*. Dir. Deepa Mehta. 1998

*Khamosh Paani*. Dir. Sabiha Sumar. 2003

*Pinjar*. Dir Chandraprakash Dwivedi, 2003

*Midnight’s Children*. Dir Deepa Mehta, 2012

*Viceroy’s House*. Dir Gurinder Chadha, 2017