



## Memories, Metaphors, and Maladies in War and Partition: Revisiting Three Films from India and Bangladesh

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### Abstract

The large corpus of partition literature, films, diaries, memoirs, and letters are all replete with a sense of loss, the excruciating pain of getting supplanted from the roots, and a premonition of endless anxiety. The partition of India in 1947, the Second World War and the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 are revived in motion pictures. The present paper discusses three films *Rangoon*, *Kya Dilli Kya Lahore*, and *Amar Bandhu Rashed*, to study the various layers of memory, the relevance of metaphor and the maladies of uprootedness. All three films are a depiction of violence and memory as represented through various metaphorical devices in the films.

**Keywords:** Borders, Memories, Partition, Nation, Violence

### Introduction:

In the introductory chapter to his celebrated book *In Freedom's Shade*, Anis Qidvai becomes eloquent about the heart-wrenching manner in which partition affects territories, delimits boundaries, and recreates the fallacies and metaphorical representations of social and political borders:

What would those mothers have gone through, as their children were torn from them and hurled into bonfires when young girls were snatched from their parents, wives wrenched from husbands and made to change their religion? Those wives, those sisters, hollowed out by the agonies of their experiences, what Hindus or Muslims they could possibly make? (Qidvai 3)

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The curious yet laborious art of nation-building has, for its pedestal, the structural and often unnegotiated ways of creating borders and boundaries. When we try to dissect the multifaceted versions of liberation, war, struggle, partition, borders, violence, and boundaries in films, literature, memoirs, diaries, articles, and letters, we come across a picture of constant oscillation: an oscillation between 'location' and 'existence', irrespective of sex, gender, class, caste, and creed. Memory appears not just to be an inert archival source of boundaries but as an active catalyst in re-treating and also the retreating of boundaries across nations. Three of the most epoch-making incidents in the convoluted history of wars, nations, and borders are the Second World War from 1939-1945, the partition of India in 1947, and the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. The subtle political nuances and the mammoth ramifications of the partition and the liberation war have been represented in variegated forms such as letters, reviews, articles, films, and memoirs penned down by individuals and political diplomats.

This paper focuses on three films with different conceptual variations. While the Bangladeshi motion picture *Amar Bandhu Rashed* by the critically acclaimed director Morshedul Islam focuses on the ideals and ideas of nation and liberation from a child's innocuous perspective, the Hindi film *Kya Dilli Kya Lahore* takes a satirical and consistent dig at the entire concept of land-division, borders, protagonists, and antagonists. The unidimensional and often fallacious concept of restructuring borders and nations finds an eloquent expression in both these films. The larger political implications of territorialisation with the sardonic instigation by landholders, policymakers, socialists, bureaucrats, and even by common people occupying different regions of the land. The best part of the film *Amar Bandhu Rashed* is that the concept of the nation is seen from the perspective of school children and how the Liberation War shapes their perspectives of independence, the Liberation soldiers, or the resistance force that fought the Pakistan army. What becomes a subject of exclusive study and close examination in these two films is the way they question and reinstate the theory of nation, border, communal violence, memory, and disintegration of a facile memory. Therefore, recalling the fact that borders and territories are constructed and for what purpose becomes one of the most important

exercises while looking at the thematic and stylistic details of these films. The pangs of violence and disparity in gender representation become more problematic in the 2017 Bollywood release *Rangoon* where love, power, betrayal, politics, and the raging urge for independence and national integration take on numerous twists and turns. Three major characters in the film, Rusi, Jemadar Malik, and Julia, become involved in layers of self-contestation and recognition of a common enemy, the British, as the film progresses. Parallely what runs is the condition of the prisoners of war. The entire terrain of domesticity and allegiance to the nation is questioned at times in this film, as aggressive and violent forms of nationalism can also sometimes be disastrous to the growth and development of any nation.

### **1.1 Understanding Nation, Nationhood, Violence, and Impulsive Activity: Progress of the Films**

Understanding the effect of violence on nation formation is a complex process. It has its own realms of rigidity, and any singlehanded effort to discuss the aftereffects of violence should be unjust. There are shifting terrains of the partition cinema that cannot be compartmentalised with any single critical analysis. For instance, when Bhaskar Sarkar writes about the 1947 Partition in his major work *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*, he correlates the physical, psychic and material, tangible losses that films portray realistically, “Speaking about 1947 remains a difficult task even after the passage of five decades: the corporeal, material and psychic losses, the widespread sense of betrayal, the overwhelming dislocations—in short, the deep lacerations inflicted on one’s sense of self and community—bring up intense and consuming passions” (Sarkar 9).

He further adds that the practical, intense sense of loss cannot be contained as part of an elite or insular kind of academic space. The effects of violence are real, and so are the sense of loss and mourning, “Not long ago, at a meeting of a prestigious South Asia conference, the sober tenor of discussions during a plenary session devoted to partition was interrupted by an upsurge of emotions: serious theoretical discourse simply could not contain the passions, the excessive other of objective, scholarly exegesis.” (Sarkar 10).

Violence, in all its different variations, can be individual as well as collective. The state policies verging on numerous political decisions that have a far-reaching impact can bring about an unexpected dislocation of an entire community, giving rise to violence. In all these films, the microcosmic concept of the individual and the family experience a growing sense of contestation with the macrocosmic idea of the nation. The absolute truth about the perfect nation is constantly demystified in the three films. *Rangoon*, set during the Second World War, revolves around the Indian national struggle during the war. On the one hand, there is a reference to the rise of the Indian National Army after the backdrop of Gandhi's *ahimsa*, and on the other hand, the story focuses on the complication brewing in the Indo-China region. As the film shows, under General Mutaguchi's order, the attack during the war was to be led by Japan and not India. Subhash Chandra Bose says: "No one can stop us from reaching Delhi now. Neither the British nor the Japanese. Prepare for war. The first step will be here. At Imphal." (Robbins 1–42).

Amidst this warlike situation and violence, love can develop in all its fancies. There is a tumultuous affair between Julia, the lead performer of a dance troupe, and Rusi Billimoria, who is the head of a production house. Julia is sent to the border to uplift the enthusiasm of the soldiers posted in the border area. In the course of the film, she meets Jemadar Malik, a war prisoner, and the two gradually fall in love. There are platoons of Japanese soldiers who are after them; the film shows the anti-aircraft bunkers and various kinds of traps that Malik and Julia confront, and amidst the violence and inefficacy of war, how their love blossoms. This does not evade the eyes of Rusi, and he confirms to Julia that he is extremely aware of her infidelity toward him and is ready to get rid of Malik by any means. On the other hand, Malik is a victim of conflict- for the love of Julia and the cause of the war, land, and soil. 'Love is too small a word' (Robbins 1–42)- this is how both Julia and Malik rekindle their love and still understand how the nation needs to gain its independence. Terrible forces and espionage lead Malik to get imprisoned at times, but gradually, the film reveals that Jemadar did not run away from his captive state in Rangoon, but he was released by the INA as they saw the future potential in him to fight the British rule in India. The film is a poignant commentary on who holds the reign of power and

politics and who suffers in the long run. There is a reference to world dictators like Hitler and Mussolini, but there is also a profound question that while dealing with the global, the common people and the policymakers have failed to see the immediate local threat from the British rule. Cinema is a very powerful medium for communicating a message that has a strong impact on shaping the furtherance of major national goals.

### **1.2 Identity, Communalism, And A Close Understanding of Humanity in Tough Times**

*Kya Dilli Kya Lahore* is a story of bifurcation, bifurcation between resources and identity, communalism and humanity, and the local and global and individual survival strategy during the war. In a cinematographically impressive way, the story shows how Rehmat Ali, a Pakistani soldier of Indian origin, and Samarth Pratap Shastri, an Indian soldier. The film unfurls against a desolate heath, pitted against the Indo-Pak border, with an intermittent interference of silence and sporadic words. A sudden altercation between the Pakistani soldier of Hindustani origin and the Indian soldier belonging to Lahore leads to certain relevant questions, which are discussed as part of this paper:

- a) Who and what situations decide the formation and the re-formation of borders and memories?
- b) When the Pakistani soldier says an excess was done to us, the Indian army cook replies how everybody thinks the same, thus, validating the question of perspectives about partition and memory through dialogues replete with contemplation and chaos.
- c) What about the members who were not part of the territorialisation? What about those Muslims who stayed back in India and those Hindus who had fond memories of the other side of the borders?

One aspect that becomes complicated in the journey of the two individuals in the film is part of the psyche and memory that remains unexplored to the fullest extent. Nostalgia about Lahore *gullies* or serpentine lanes, feelings about leaving family and getting re-planted as a cook, an underling in the Indian army, Anarkali Bazaar in

Lahore, re-framing of Pakistan and the prospects of intruders, and retelling of history through power dynamics are some of the aspects that this film tries to interrogate. In this connection, it would be appropriate to refer to the work called *Revisiting India's Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture and Politics*, where the chapter called *Partitions Within* revivifies and elaborates on the interplay of the schematic courses of individual and collective memory across borders. The rigidity of caste, creed, and religion combined with the re-institutionalisation of political identities, surrounding, and dehumanisation have larger consequences in both individual and larger social aspects. As the percipient critic, Jeremy A. Rinker points out in this essay: "In taking a walk through history with local respondents, one can identify the unmet needs of past social and historical trauma. This unmasking of trauma's legacy reveals social spaces for greater understanding of the 'other' and opens the possibility for future-going reconciliation." (Rinker 284).

Trudging along various segments of history thus becomes a struggle for a second phase of independence for both the Hindu and the Muslim characters in the film *Kya Dilli Kya Lahore*. Partial remembering and intentional amnesia can also be two factors one must consider while the characters and the turn of events in the film are examined. Segmented and scattered glimpses of Chandni Chowk, Jama Masjid, and the whiff of *korma* all coalesce into a single whole. In the experiences of the present situation, when the Indian and the Pakistani soldier eat together and share their sorrowful smiles and joyful memories together, they somehow remain as the subservient representatives and tortured devices of an atrocious state system on both sides of the border. As a form of interjected enunciation, therefore, the Indian who helps the Pakistani soldier based on the grounds of humanity becomes an *adhura Pakistani* (half-Pakistani) in the film. In this direction, there can be questioning in the pattern of relocating the memory, which becomes essential:

- a) Whose memory is it, anyway?
- b) Does the memory of the underlings differ a lot from the memory of those in power?
- c) Are the citadels of partition memory and border violence brittle?

- d) What can be the possible consequences of obliterating the memory intentionally? What kind of survival relief does it provide?
- e) Is there any hegemonic and contested structure that the individual characters are trying to rattle against?

This is what Ipshita Chanda points out very adroitly in her chapter titled “Many Pakistans, Half a Village: Interrogating the Discourse of Identity through the Partition Literature of India”, as part of a larger academic project titled *The Indian Partition in Literature and Films: History, Politics and Aesthetics*. In this chapter, Chanda also refers to different shades of counter-discourse, especially when it comes to studying partition and memory studies, “The shades of the opposition in between these extreme positions remain posited upon the variations of the hegemonic structure of thought construction, discourse formation, and affective response. The hegemonic theme itself is accepted as given.” (Chanda 132). Voices become muffled; borders become prominent, and the decision of human beings often dissuade the blurry, almost humongous border strokes, lines, and shades from becoming obsolete and blurred. Through dialogues, a reiteration of scenes, and motion framed across a bioscopic ending and beginning, people keep on creating mapping, borders, and memories. In this connection, the whole concept of 'identity' needs to be examined in different aspects of the term. As far as the fluidity of memory is concerned, it becomes evident from the progression of scenes in the two films that:

- 1) The fallacies of memory and forced memory keep the boundary intact and in place, and as viewers, readers and critics, we keep on jumping over and out again.
- 2) The plurality of memory perspective is represented by the background, setting, and characters.
- 3) Lack of any type of commitment to memory due to the fear of memory contamination and disintegration.

### **1.3 How Do We Study Commitment to The Nation and a Simultaneous Exploration of Violence and Contamination?**

Commitment and contamination go simultaneously; they appear differently to different minds: one for the child who aspires to attain

a solemn stature beyond rectified borders and one for the adult whom both fails and transverses the liberating necessities of hybridity. This is what becomes apparent in the film *Amar Bandhu Rashed*, or *My Friend Rashed* directed by Morshedul Islam. Starting with a quaint and verdurous greenscape where the long shots meander across small Bangladeshi hamlets, village people, schools, teachers, adolescent children carousing all day, and last but not least, a curious sense of inquisitiveness and attachment to the national flag, national identity, and belongingness to one's motherland. Multiple symbols are used to highlight nation, fallacies of memory and borders, and productivity of land in cultural forms. Symbols like re-naming a child named *Lattu* as *Rashed* by the schoolmaster, the ideal called *swadhin Bangla* or independent Bangladesh, the golden and red splashing of colours across a viridian green background on the national flag-indicating *sonar Bangla* or golden and fertile Bangladesh are all instances that project the unanimous and clarion-call of a unified nation and nation-state. In this connection, it would be apt to refer to what Bhaskar Sarkar says about the 'national symbolic' in his seminal text *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*, "The concept of the National Symbolic is useful in understanding Indian popular cinema's promotion of a negotiated national subjectivity capable of projecting its Indianness, and being a citizen of a modern nation-state." (52). Sarkar further elaborates on the fact that, "In this respect, popular films of the period in question can be seen productively as cultural forms that sought to make transformations of national life (to a bourgeois, capitalist, democratic, secular polity) emotionally intelligible to the people." (52).

The productivity in cultural forms that aim to transform a national life transcends time, dates and even years, authenticating the contemporary nature of both these films. What an innocuous child observes, rather visualises territorial violence and national victimisation, becomes nothing short of a memoir or a living repository of partition memories in the larger context of world cinema and partition archives. The archive that has yet another transformation-sharing aspect is the Hindu woman of a Bangladeshi household acting to change her religious affiliation and orientation, getting dressed up in a Muslim *burqa* and leaving her *bhite-mati* (Bengali term for the land where she was born and her earlier

generations lived). This picture stands as the burning document of recreation of a famished memory and an alternate level of amnesia where memories return to plague the body, mind, and spirit not just of an individual mother or wife but also of the nation as a whole. *Amar Bandhu Rashed* preserves and exacerbates memories in a grown-up man who tells the story of how finally Rashed was killed by the military forces who were antagonistic to nation-building. Revisiting partition, history, and historiography from detrimental state and hegemonic forces makes a clear impact as to ‘why’ and ‘how’ we should address the viability and adaptability of the issue of memory through and after partition. Guns and guerrilla warfare trample the very foundation of childhood in the film. Variegated perspectives on child psychology permeate the entire film; the tenacity of Rashed somehow becomes congruent with child stories of the Bangladesh Liberation War, or *Muktijuddha* represented in films like *The Clay Bird* (2002), *Guerilla* (2011), *Shongram* (2014) and Tareque Masud’s famous documentary *Mukti’r Gaan* (1995). The internalisation of war, liberation, and true freedom thus crosses all theoretical boundaries, creating an alternate branch of the epistemic platform that contest and re-establish memory and border as a universal process. Memory does not blot out the cynic realism of death and destruction in the novel *Amar Bandhu Rashed*, on which the film of the same name is based. The concluding portion of the book is especially worth remembering, where Rashed's friend Ibu, the narrator, breaks down in tears when he comes to know from two of his other friends Ashraf and Fajlu, that Rashed is no more. Rashed still remains his friend; in the routine humdrum life, he keeps on conversing with Rashed, his closest friend, even after his death. In one such hallucinatory encounter, Ibu asks him, “*Toke jakhan guli karchhilo, tor ki byatha legechhilo?*” (Ikabāla 111). Meaning, when you were being shot, did you feel any pain? And then, Rashed lowers his face and answers with a sullen uncertainty that on the verge of his death, what he yearned for the most was the flora, fauna, rivers, trees, and the broad expansion of sky above Bangladesh, his homeland. The film and the text show Rashed bidding goodbye to Ibu and walking away in slow motion, heaving a sigh of pain, with tremulous eyes, a deep sense of anguish on the world and the whole of humanity. The vigil and the violence of the Bangladesh Liberation War kill Rashed, and he remains only an imaginary, hallucinatory existence for his

friend, as part of his memory, adding to his malady. It should be worth commenting in this direction that when these three motion pictures narrate a composite story of memories through metaphors, they do so while both sustaining and interrogating various centres of power and agencies. Randall Collins points out in his book *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* that violence is a mixture of various human emotions that lead to complications like war and mass hatred, “Violence as it actually becomes visible in real-life situations is about the intertwining of human emotions of fear, anger and excitement in ways that run against the conventional morality of normal situations.” (4).

Violence is one of the chief ingredients in the three films discussed here, as violence is connected to the study of memory, and it creates maladies. The metaphorical usage of colour, sound image, setting, and background all metaphorically refer to the acceptance of one’s own soil and a more in-depth study of the nation. For instance, partition in *Kya Dilli Kya Lahore* or *Amar Bandhu Rashed* is not an external act. It is a strong force of internalisation of human values, propositions, and mental masquerades that have been deeply embedded from ancient times. Pride in one’s territory and the invention of survival strategies are then needed, which build up the force and tension of self-recognition. Simultaneously there is also another observation that with power and hierarchy comes the collective sense of subordination of the marginalised groups by the ones in power. It is a complex group dynamic that is shown with a sense of fluidity in feature films. Angus Stewart’s insightful commentary on relationships of power and domination in his book *Theories of Power and Domination: The Politics of Empowerment in Late Modernity* is quite noteworthy to understand this complex nexus and methodology of power that leads to violence, “... an adequate methodology of power requires recognition of a meaningful and identifiable distinction between expressions of wants and preferences and the symbolic and immanent meaning of social practices dissonant with the reproduction of structures of domination.” (44). Hence, the exercise of power is never without a specific ideology and methodology that gets reflected in areas of violence and the retention and exercise of memory.

### **Conclusion: Collective Memory, Amnesia and War-related Violence**

What transpires as a sequential process is a rigorous everyday exercise about memory and amnesia: *Kya Dilli Kya Lahore*, *Rangoon*, and *Amar Bandhu Rashed* metamorphose into an alternative fraternity and do not remain restricted only to films. Fragmented memories creating and negotiating alienation, rootlessness, and violence pass through the lenses of different generations. What we tend to forget, why we forget unintentionally, and why we forget intentionally thus are juxtaposed. A close association with the atrocities inflicted during the 1947 Partition, or during the Liberation War of 1971, thus becomes a cohesive whole in re-discovering one's own self. As an example, to this, we can look at how memory with regard to post-independence and pre-independence Amritsar is looked at by Churnjeet Mahn and Anne Murphy in their work titled *Partition and the Practice of Memory*. What they look at is the intersectional point of the commemoration of memory, as well as forgetfulness associated with certain geopolitical regions during and after the partition. These three films under discussion also do the same. They deploy all the hegemonic tendencies present in a state superstructure, which augments fallacies, metaphors, and maladies associated with partition voices. The interstitial spaces thus remain; they will remain to create new territories, mind-mapping, and borders once more. The partition repository of memory and malady will thus remain inexhaustible. When we look at the existential crisis that the war has already channelised in the mind of the people, we find how maladies become more intense over the future years because the people cannot forget the trauma that is associated with war and partition. Death is not a malady all the time; it is a respite at times, as shown in the films. What remains as a malady is an excruciating memory of living a dreadful life every day.

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