



Gendered Trauma: Exploring Ethnic Genocide and Violence against Women in Deepa Mehta's Film "1947 Earth"

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Research Article

Abstract

In August 1947, India gained freedom, as the almost 200 years-long British Raj or Crown Rule came to an end. But although the illumination of liberty came without any blood bathing war vivisection came along with this. British Govt. partitioned India into two self-dominating nations, while the Hindu majority formed India, the Muslim majority formed Pakistan. The reasons behind the partition are numerous and complex. Several grave consequences, too, followed. However, this paper attempts to highlight the gendered nature of violence during the communal riots. Like any other moment of national crisis, partition affected women with much more intense. But the irony lies in the fact that in the patriarchal society, women suffered not only in the hands of those belonging to the rival group of religion but were tortured by their family members too. In the name of 'honour' they were forced to commit suicide. Fathers killed their daughters to avoid humiliation. This paper attempts to recreate the experiences and suffering of the hapless women during the exodus of partition by an analysis of Deepa Mehta's movie "Earth:1947", through the lens of feminism and a narrative of rape metaphor.

Keywords: Partition, Genocide, Violence, "1947 Earth", Rape, Feminism.

Introduction

Earth 1947 is an Indian movie released in 1998 is the second of Mehta's trilogy set in India, the first being "Fire" (1996). The film was written and directed by Mehta and is based on a fiction by Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, which was first published under the title *The Ice Candy Man*, and is considered to be a semi-autobiographical novel. The story told by both Mehta and Sidhwa is wedded to reality. The director, here, with her creative aesthetic senses, represents several socio-political issues, mirrors the darker side of the partition, and explores the uncomfortable truth about humanity that is difficult to digest. It is set in the small (now Pakistani) town of Lahore, which serves as a metaphorical microcosm of India, where Parsee, Sikh, Hindu and Muslim communities had shared a harmonious co-existence from time immemorial, the movie shows how partition ruptured the friendship and how women's body historically became territories, in which man acted out their aggression.

Theoretical framework

For *Aljazeera* Sashi Tharoor once wrote "The British had been horrified during the revolt 1857 to see Hindus and Muslims fighting side by side and under each other's command against the foreign oppressor. They vowed that this would not happen again" (Tharoor n.page). The white exploitative masters kept their vow ultimately, as their 'divide and rule' policy not only fomented religious antagonism but found its tragic culmination in the partition of 1947. The task



of dividing India was assigned to Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer. What seems to be more ironical is that a complete stranger who had never been in India before, and knew nothing of its history, society and culture was to draw lines that would separate Hindus and Muslims, who co-existed as peacefully as brothers from different mothers from time immemorial and would partition the 'Hindustani souls' who fought together to free their 'Bharat maa' from the British chains.

The Radcliffe awarded 'Shadow Lines' caused the largest migration in human history. More than twelve million people migrated and the death counts varied between 200,000 to two million people (Butalia 76). Everybody wanted to be on the 'right' side of the lines. Ismat Chughtai described the trauma of partition in the following beautiful words:

Those whose bodies were whole had hearts that were splintered. Families were torn apart...the bonds of human relationship were in tatters, and in the end many souls remained behind in Hindustan while their bodies started off to Pakistan. (qtd in Bhalla 189)

This statement of Chughtai goes beyond mere facts, dates and numbers and reflects the trauma of dislocation that shaped the lives of many refugees and found little reflection in written history. However, attempts to investigate the pathetic conditions of women meet a stark void. Historical works dealing with partition see them only as 'objects of study rather than subjects' (Menon 11). Thereby a gendered study of partition is crucial to breaking the glaring silence enforced upon women in history books.

The writings of the authors like Urvashi Butalia, Bhasin, Menon and Chughtai are great help to explain partition from the vantage point of women. In her essay "Community, State and Gender: Some Reflections on the Partition of Women", Butalia referred to a pamphlet written by an activist group of women namely "Women against Fundamentalism":

I am a woman /I want to raise my voice /because communalism affects me/In every communal riot/my sisters are raped, my children are killed.../my world is destroyed/and then/I am left to pick up pieces.../ It matters little if I a Muslim, Hindu, Sikh/and yet I cannot help my sisters.

Violence is almost always instigated by men, but its greatest impact is felt by women. In violent conflict it is women who are raped, women who are widowed... in the name of "national integrity and unity... (Butalia 128-29)

This pamphlet justifiably locates women in the framework of partition violence. Further, it raises its voice of protest against the attempt of assigning roles to women as bearers of "national integrity and unity".

Another author Deniz Kandiyoti in her essay "Identity and Its Discontent: Women and Nation" asserted that "women bear the burden of being 'mother and the nation'... as well as being those who reproduce the boundaries of ethnic/national groups who transmit culture and who are the privileged signifiers of national differences" (Kandiyoti 1490). Women's ideological position as markers of national and religious pride degrades their values and limits them only to their functioning reproductive organs that should be used and regulated by the patriarchal society. One may note that India is commonly regarded as "Bharat Maa" or Mother India. The country is seen as a metaphorical mother, whereas the land is seen as her body. Identifying a nation as a mother/woman legitimizes the idea that the country needs to be protected by its male citizens from evil others, thereby sanctioning communal wars.

They ethnic genocides during partition witnessed two primary forms of gendered violence. The first kind of violence was inflicted upon women by men of opposite religious groups, these included rape, kidnapping, abduction, mutilation of genitalia and public



humiliation. The women were made to parade naked in public or places of worship, their wombs were ripped out. Men belonging to rival religions often tattooed their breasts or genitalia with religious symbols like the moon or crescent or branded slogans like 'Jay Pakistan' or 'Jay Hindustan'. A second form of violence was inflicted upon women by their own families. This could vary from 'honour killing' to the insistence upon them by their male kin to commit suicide to safeguard the purity and chastity of the community. Menon and Bhasin focused on these different kinds of violence and asserted that "each one of the violent acts mentioned above has specific symbolic meaning and physical consequences, and all of them treated women's bodies as territory to be conquered, claimed by the assailant" (Menon and Bhasin 43)

Rape, in this context, becomes the ultimate act of shaming a woman as well as the community she belongs to. These rapes, which historians have often referred to as 'power rape' or 'heroic rape', were not originated from lust or carnal desire, but rather from the idea of degrading the 'weaker' other (female) to leave an impact upon the 'strong' other (male). Shumona Dasgupta in her essay "The Extraordinary and the Everyday: Locating Violence in Women's Narrative of Partition" claims that violence against women was a way to reclaim masculinity. Dasgupta asserts:

Partition was coded as a failure of the male nationalist to protect the political integrity of the nation, as well as the inability of Hindu and Sikh male to protect their women. This led to a very violent compensatory performance of... masculinity. Women were accommodated within the disciplinary parameters of a neo-nationalist discourse, only if they consented to be objects of violence. (Dasgupta 46)

By raping, mutilating and impregnating women, the purity of the bloodline of particular community can be tempered. The raped women have no place in society, or in their families, they are abandoned by their husbands and find shelter in camps of raped women or brothels. As previously mentioned, a woman's primary role was considered to be her role as a mother and it was through motherhood that sexuality is validated. As a consequence, when a woman was raped or abducted, it can be stated that her "sexuality is no longer comprehensible or acceptable" (Butalia 190). Usually, rape and sexual assaults were invariably followed by abduction of victimized women. These abducted women typically became domestic servants or prostitutes, some of them in rare instances, were married to their abductor and forced to claim to live a happy and respectable life. Later, although, a recovery act of these abducted women was begun, both by Indian and Pakistani governments, the ideology behind this act was not simply to bring back the abducted women to home, but rather to ensure that women were returned to their male family members. "[T]he women were important only as objects, bodies to be recovered and returned to them to their 'owners', to the place where they 'belonged'" (Leonard 13).

1947 Earth - A Study

Mehta's "1947: Earth" is a grim reminder of how gendered bodies particularly women's bodies are regarded as 'contested spaces' over which different ethnic, political, and religious groups fight to acquire the symbolic territory. History is seen through the eyes of a brace-legged eight-year-old girl who is affected by polio. Lenny (Maia Sethna) is her name. She is the pampered daughter of an affluent Parsee family, her father being Rustam Sethna (Arif Zakaria) and her mother being Bunty Sethna (Kitu Gidwani). The life of this little girl revolves around her 'Ayah' i.e. her beautiful young nanny namely Shanta (Nandita Das). Sidhwa describes the feminine grace of Shanta by the following words: **Ayah is chocolate brown and short. Everything about her is eighteen years old, round and plump. (Sidhwa 236)** This young nanny is admired by all the men in a close-knit friend group, her primary suitors being Hasan



(Rahul Khanna), the masseur and the titular Ice candy man of Sidhwa's novel, Dil Navaz (Amir Khan). The story moves around this group of friends – Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsees. Their name may be irrelevant to the story but their religion is not. In the movie, they are seen hanging around together in restaurants and parks in the pre-partitioned Lahore. The first part of the movie sets the camaraderie that existed between them before the partition. However, the news about Partition changes everything. People lose their all in the struggles that follow. The Hindus convert to Islam, the Sikhs flee the lands which has been their homes for ages. The Muslims lose their near and dear ones, the massage wallah loses his life, the Ice-candy wallah loses his humanity and Ayah loses herself and in all these little Lenny loses her innocence – understands what it means to be raped, sees people torn to death, and realizes that trust has no meaning in the grim world of religious fanaticism.

In the very first scene, Mehta makes her audience understand the theme of the film. It opens with a little girl, Lenny painting while the same girl narrates in her grown-up voice her experiences during partition:

When the British Empire in India started to collapse, along with the talks of India's independence from Britain came rumblings about its division in two countries, Pakistan and India. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs who had lived together as one entity for centuries suddenly started to clamor for pieces of India for themselves. The arbitrary line of division the British would draw to carve up India in August of 1947 would scar the subcontinent forever. (1947: Earth 00:00:01-30)

In the very next move, Lenny the apparent child breaks a plate and questions her puzzled mother: "Can one break a country?" (1947 Earth, 00:00:03-00) The willful breaking of the plate suggests Lenny's innocent intervention in political actions of dividing human relationships. Mehta thus subtly criticizes both the British and the nationalist leaders for taking such a decision which would smash the unity of the country. In the next two scenes, the same theme of the peaceful co-existence of people belonging to different religious backgrounds is portrayed. In the first scene referred to here, we see the house helps of the Sethna family are not only working hand-in-hand, forgetting their religious identity, but they are caring for each other. Imam Din (Kulbhusan Kharbanda), a Muslim servant forces Shanta to eat: **Here, have a roti...Have one; you need strength to look after the rascal Lenny and her cousin Adi. (1947 Earth, 00:00:04-15)** The second scene, however, has a different significance. It shows a dinner party held at Lenny's house, attended by the British inspectorate of police Mr. Rogers (Eric Peterson) and his wife and Mr. Singh (Gulshan Grover) and Mrs. Singh, another family friend of the Sethna family. Suddenly the party erupts over the political future of India. The Sikh man attempts to beat the British Mr. Rogers when he later insults the Sikh guru "Master Tara Singh". The firm declaration of Mr. Rogers that, "Hindus, Muslims, and even the Sikhs are going to jockey for power" (1947 Earth, 00:00:06-29) forebodes that the apparent peaceful existence is soon to be lost as communal riots are going to break in.



Figure. 1. The Park Scene: Retrieved from "1947: Earth" (1998) by Deepa Mehta



The park scene brings in Mehta's feminist approach towards partition. Here the director goes beyond mere religious identities and portrays the degrading attitude of the patriarchal society towards the female. Here we see the friends group for the first time sitting around Shanta discussing political issues and sharing jokes. When unconsciously the sari of Shanta slips down revealing half of her naked breasts, it becomes the centre of the male gazes there. What seems to be more ironical is that Hasan, whom Shanta would later address as "gentleman admiral" (1947 *Earth*, 00:00:14-35) later, and would fall in love with him for his gentleness, is no exception in this case. The scene thus symbolizes the male degradation of a female to a mere body denying her identity as a human being.

Another scene that symbolizes the patriarchal domination over the female is Pappu's marriage. The twelve-year-old girl is married off by her Hindu family to an old man, just because the groom is a Christian and this marriage would save their "honor" by saving their daughter from being raped by either the Hindus or the Muslims. When Lenny asks for the reason behind this marriage Ayah justifies it by saying "Fear is making people do crazy things these days (1947 *Earth*, 00:00:35-43)". Ayah's statement suggests how the religious and sectarian conflicts enact violence on Pappu's sexuality. Thus, Mehta portrays how girls are treated as being the "repository of men's honor" (Butalia 139).



Figure. 2. The Kite-Flying Scene: Retrieved from "1947 Earth" (1998) by Deepa Mehta

The kite-flying scene is perhaps the lightest-hearted scene in the entire movie. Thus, the first half of the movie although hints at the awaiting tragedy, does not include any massacre or blood-shedding violence, rather it attempts to depict an idyllic society. This part is "full of the autumnal sadness of Chekov's play or Ray's 'Charulata' or Regle Du Jeu" (Liddell no page). Here we can observe people living life, being friends, making love and playing games. But the cracks gradually start to appear, driving apart friends and lovers. The playful forebodings of the Ice Candy man that, "when the division comes there is going to be a huge storm and you will fight like animals" (1947 *Earth*, 00:00:28-43) seems to be coming true as the poison of hatred spreads shown as madness coming out of the human heart.

Days give way to nights, earthly browns and sun to blackness, and love and friendship to hatred and death. As the weeks pass, arguments over the dinner table turn to violence on a street corner. The close-knit group of old friends starts quarrelling between themselves in the name of religion. Although Hasan tries to settle the bitter bickering of the Muslim butcher and the Sikh zoo-keeper, Sher Singh and makes all the friends vow to stand by each other in this moment of crisis, their feeble voices suggest the hollowness of their promises. All the hell breaks loose when a train arrives from Gurudaspur to Lahore bearing slaughtered dead bodies of Muslim men. Dreadful horror strikes one when one comes to know that "four sacks are filled only with women's breasts" (1947 *Earth*, 00:00:53-02). The tragedy breaks upon the plot with more intensity as the unlucky sisters of one of the protagonists, Dil Navaz, are victims of this inhuman violence. This incident lets the evil genie of suppressed ethnic hatred out of the bottle and the 'eye for an eye' violence begins. Dil Navaz turns from a cheerful, romantic, simple common man to a person who becomes violent and villainous. The pitiful man, even in this tragic situation



does not lose his concern that riots are not the only reason behind this violence; rather the devils within human beings are responsible. His words towards Shanta bear testimony to his poetic realization:

This is not only about Hindu and Muslims. It's about what's inside us. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh- we are all bastards, all animals. Like the lion in the zoo that Lenny baby is scared of. (1947 Earth, 00:0102-00)

But even this philosophical cognizance does not prevent him from throwing grenades in Hindu houses as he admits later:

Yes I've thrown grenades at Hindus and Sikhs whom I've know all my life. I want to kill every one of them for each breast they cut off my sisters. (1947 Earth, 00:01:13-43)

The train incident is not the only one to depict violence against women. It seems hard to prevent the rolling down of tears when one hears an innocent child describing his own mother's rape:

After they left, I went to look for my mother. She was in a mosque. Her hair was tied to the ceiling fan. She was naked. (Earth 1947, 00:01:11-41)

However, the worst betrayal in this film results from an irreconcilable confusion of loyalties of a trusting heart. When Ayah falls in love with Hasan, the Ice Candy man enraged with jealousy and wounded by the mob atmosphere leads a group of Muslim rioters to Lenny's house demanding the removal of all the Hindu servants. Although all the others servants are saved as the Hindu gardener Hari has converted his religion and has become a Muslim now, his new name being Himmat Ali, and the other Hindu servant Moti has now become Christian namely Mr. David Masih the Hindu Ayah falls prey to these maddened Muslim rioters. Both Bunty, Lenny's mother and Imam Din try to save Shanta. Even the pious Muslim Imam Din falsely swears in the name of God that Shanta has left for Amritsar, but in vain. Although all the Muslim rioters seem to believe him and Lenny's mother lets out a sigh of relief, this proves to be an illusion. The Ice Candy Man comes forth in this moment. Innocent Lenny disoriented by mob and trusting her 'ice candywallah' admits that Ayah is still hiding in the house. Grave consequence follows. The young nanny is dragged off to her impending doom.



Figure 3. The Abduction of Ayah: Retrieved from "1947 Earth" (1998) by Deepa Mehta

The tragic fate of Ayah would haunt Lenny for the rest of her life. The little girl shared with her Ayah a deeper relationship than merely that of a helpless child her caretaker. This is the only reason behind the fact Lenny would remain traumatized after Ayah falls prey to the aggression of the rioters. The movie shows Lenny as a ripe old woman, still reflecting on her unintentional betrayal:

Fifty years have gone by since I betrayed my Ayah...and that day when I lost my Ayah, I lost a large part of myself. (1947 Earth, 00:01:41-16)

Madhuri pointed out that "The violence against women in this film ranges from physical, sexual to psychological and symbolic" (71). Mehta portrays violence against women in "1947: Earth" in particularly three scenes, the first being the inhuman massacre on the train, secondly the mass rape of a woman as described by her unlucky child in the refugee camp and finally



Ayah's abduction and rape in the concluding scene. Contrasting the violent scene of the train massacre with Nehru's speech Mehta has emphasized that, "the moment of India's partition and Pakistan's formation is marked by and marked on the mutilated, dismembered and wounded bodies of the refugees on the train, rendering the bodies meaningful not only as the material effects of the political partition but also as a metaphor for the increasingly divided community" (Herman 131). Especially the women's mutilated breasts and bodies demonstrate the communal and national dishonour attached to women's bodies.

The process of emasculation of a particular male body during the time of partition also finds an anguished expression in Mehta's film through the scene of humiliation of the Hindu gardener Hari. This gardener's forced conversion and circumcision not only suggests his physical mutilation and subjection to political power but also reveals how his masculinity is constructed as effeminate, rather than as warrior, as he does not belong to the dominant Muslim group in Lahore. Mehta further suggests that this circumscription of the hapless gardener in the scene where the Muslim rioters, including Dil Navaz, who happened to be a close friend of Hari, enter the house of the Sethna family and hearing that Hari has become a Muslim now demands to examine how true a Muslim he is. They ask him to read 'Kalma' and demand to see his new circumcised penis. Hari is in this scene disrobed for public view and hence symbolically raped.

Madhuri Chatterjee asserts that the film "1947: Earth" raises questions regarding boundaries imposed on the female body which acquire significance in the larger social discourse" (Chaterjee 80). Similarly, Neelam Raisinghani points out that "Mehta shows in this film how women's bodies are constructed as a contested ground and as weapons of nationalist politics upon which communal violence enacted during the partition" (Raisinghani 162). The two central female characters in this film are Lenny, the narrator and her 18-year-old Ayah, Shanta. While the plagued body of Lenny signifies the damage done to the country by the colonizers, the abduction of Shanta portrays the further torture of the country by the event of partition. The beautiful body of Shanta, in this film, becomes a significant symbol of the nation, the undivided India- luring both insiders and outsiders to its bounty and treasures. As Shanta belongs to the Hindu community and lives in Lahore, her body becomes a site of conflict between India's and Pakistan's national and religious identities. From the beginning of the movie, the character of this beautiful girl is drawn sympathetically. She challenged the patriarchal nationalist discourses in her community. Ayah holds a desirable position in her group and everyone desires her. The importance of Shanta's role in keeping the group around her united even in times of crisis is depicted by the words of Hasan: "Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs are living apart. Only the group around you remains the same" (1947 *Earth*). The Butcher, too, responds, "Yes Shanta bibi, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, all of us hover around you like fireflies around fire" (1947 *Earth*). As a centre of attraction, Ayah constantly negotiates with the growing tensions in the group. She resists those conservative religious talks by warning the group that she will stop visiting the park if the communal talks continue to exist in the group. Further, she not only articulated political insights but also expressed her choice, sexuality and desire in the film. Her refusal to Dil Navaz is an example of her direct resistance to the divisive religious nationalism in post-colonial India. On the other hand, her selection of the masseur as her future husband clearly proves her desire and her choice in the film. As Didur argues, "her desires continue to subvert and remake that imaginary at the local level; she holds the group of her admirers together and diffuses conflict among them, at least temporarily despite the intensification of racist and patriarchal discourse at the time of partition" (Didur 58). However, Shanta, too, fails to resist the effect of patriarchal religious and nationalist violence against her body and sexuality as the film concludes with her abduction by a group of nationalist leaders including her admirers. By portraying Shanta's



abduction and rape, Mehta focuses on how the violence of the border-making project of nationalist discourses polices bodies, especially women's bodies.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that Mehta used sound effects, minimalistic dialogues and actor's expressions to leave all the graphic details of violence on women during and after the riots of 1947 in the imagination of the audience. It captures the saddest truth- these women are the innocent victims of the communal wars, who did nothing to cause these riots and yet were the most affected sufferers of riots. While Sidhwa's novel ends with Ayah's resistance and Ice Candy Man's madness, the movie significantly ends with the tragic note of Ayah's kidnapping. Mehta intended to represent the movie as a counter-narrative to the 'guts and glories' movies dealing with the nationalism of that time. Contrasting the official history that does not offer insight into the "myths about shame and honor, blood and belonging" (Menon and Bhasin 21), the film presents "women's histories which interrogate not only the history we know, but how we know it" (Menon and Bhasin 21), and thereby allows the revelation of multiple truths as opposed to the singular official state-sanctioned truth. In essence, the film by investigating gendered violence during partition and by exemplifying how women's bodies are reduced to the status of a mute token, explores thus a far-silenced gynocentric history of partition.

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