

VIOLENCE AND SILENCE:
KEN MCMULLEN'S *PARTITION*
AND GURINDER CHADHA'S *VICEROY'S HOUSE*

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ABSTRACT

The literary and cinematic representation of violence has always been problematic and has involved ethical imperatives and rational understanding of an event that often defies logical understanding. In this paper, I propose to deal with two films that directly engage with the political negotiations that took place concerning the Partition of India and the cartographic violence that ensued: Ken McMullen's *Partition* (2007) and Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House* (2017). The work compares the representations of the Partition in these two films to investigate whether the reparative or sentential aspect of cinema heal our memories or compromise with the truth to connect with the audience.

KEYWORDS: 1947, Partition of India, Ken McMullen, Gurinder Chadha.

VIOLENCIA Y SILENCIO:
PARTICIÓN, DE KEN MCMULLEN,
Y *EL ÚLTIMO VIRREY DE INDIA*, DE GURINDER CHADHA

RESUMEN

La representación literaria y cinematográfica de la violencia siempre ha sido problemática y ha implicado mandatos éticos y racionales sobre un evento histórico que muchas veces escapa a los límites del entendimiento humano. Este artículo estudia dos películas que analizan las negociaciones políticas que tuvieron lugar en la Partición de India y la violencia cartográfica que siguió: *Partition* (2007), de Ken McMullen, y *El último Virrey de India*, *Viceroy's House* (2017), de Gurinder Chadha. El trabajo compara las representaciones en los dos films para investigar si son reparadoras en cuanto a que sanan recuerdos o si oscurantizan la realidad de los eventos históricos para conectar con la audiencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: 1947, partición de India, Ken McMullen, Gurinder Chadha.

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Cinema and literature in their own ways reflect the psyche of a nation. In their own ways, they are different from historical records in recreating the emotional investment in the event. The Partition of India in 1947 left an indelible mark in the formation and progress of India as a nation-state. Freedom came with the caveat of the division of the subcontinent. Violence of an unprecedented scale marred the road to freedom. More than 1.8 million people died and many others were displaced by the Partition. The myth of a strong united India was shattered forever with an ensuing violence that led to the emergence of Pakistan and later to that of Bangladesh. The Partition was not just an isolated event or an act of violence with a definite resolution, rather it was an act that changed the lives of millions of people for generations to come. The Partition affected women more severely because, besides being killed, they were often raped and violated. The disruption and the disjuncture that it created had sprouted other myriad acts of violence in the forms of not only wars and riots, but even in that of a nuclear standoff. Since 1947, and even after all these years of independence, literature and cinema had found it difficult to cope with the violence that Partition entailed. The identity of India was negotiated in terms of this originary act of violence against the concept of nationhood. The imaginative leap that 'nationhood' demanded, and the 'thirst with destiny' that Nehru talked about during and after the Partition, had to undergo a complex partition of cultural memory as well. It is therefore interesting to look at how cinema as a medium would try to negotiate both the utopian and the disruptive aspects of the idea of nationalism whose future was inevitably mediated through the Partition of India.

The literary and cinematic representations of violence have always been problematic, and have involved ethical imperatives and rational understanding of an event that often defies logical explanation. One might argue whether there is any unbiased way of representing violence without falling into the trap of valorising it. There are political, cultural and social sides that one might take, and the process often occurs deliberately, and at other times unconsciously, in such a manner that our choices of representation are often marred with implicit biases. The emotive aspect of representation in terms of verbal and visual imageries, in literature and in cinema, recreates our past in more myriad ways than the representation of facts in historical discourse. The possibility of multiple stories interacting with each other, and with multiple perspectives, shows us the different sides of the story and sprouts in us the possibility of empathy. To grapple with the unspeakable violence of the Partition of the country has always been a challenge for literature and cinema alike.

In this paper, I propose to deal with two films that directly engage with the political negotiations that took place concerning the Partition of India and the cartographic violence that ensued: Ken McMullen and Tariq Ali's 2007 film *Partition* and Gurinder Chadha's 2017 film *Viceroy's House* (It was named *Partition: 1947* in the Indian release). These two films represent the politics of the final round-table negotiations and I attempt to compare the representation of violence in them as opposed to other literary and cinematic representations of Partition, such as the short stories by Saadat Hasan Manto or films such as Govind Nihalini's *Tamas* (1988). The violence of Partition has in a sense challenged the boundaries between the community and the nation. It was a violence that was not only inflicted on the



body of the nation-state, but also on its smallest constituent, that is, the exiguous physical human body. My paper proposes to investigate whether the reparative or sentential aspect of cinema heal our memories or does cinema compromise with the truth to achieve an empathetic understanding of this event.

So, is cinema on the theme of the Partition all about mourning and loss? Or, is it in some sense reparative and therapeutic, hopefully looking forward to a future more posited in rebuilding a new cultural imagination where a willed cultural amnesia is the way forward? Cinema about the Partition can also be about the representation of an event that is utterly inexplicable. The desire to know and understand the truth in its multiple dimensions has always been the purpose of storytelling, even if the truth is bitter and laced with unspeakable violence. Storytelling also satisfies our urge towards epistemophilia. Visual storytelling, as in films, also hankers towards this desire to know the truth. There are many films on Partition, which, unlike nationalist historiography, seeks to continuously deal with the long-lasting lacerations that Partition has inflicted on the individual and the cultural psyche of the nation. For an individual, the term Partition has served as a borderline not only between two nations but also between the three metaphorical spaces: the things that we have left or lost, the things we might have gained and the things we could have achieved, if the Partition never happened. Cinema as a medium can give permanence to the contingent nature of human experience and give motion to our memories; the past is thereby resuscitated from the dead, evoked with all our paradigms of reality and fantasy, so that we can continuously and variously interact with it in the process of understanding it. The resuscitation of a traumatic event, the re-enactment of it, is a way of not only negotiating with it, but it is as if the reel life will lead us to continue with our real life. A mythical metonymic re-enactment of the past is also a way of unencumbering the lack of, the loss of the sacred space that is always/already deeply etched in our unconscious.

Of the many movies that describe Partition, Gurinder Chadha's film directly deals with the politics in the Viceroy's house from just before the arrival of Lord Mountbatten till the transfer of power leading to India's independence, and more elaborately engage with the negotiations that took place leading to the Partition of India. John Hutnyk rightly points out in his essay "Screen Violence and Partition" that this film can be classified in the genre of "Raj revisionist films" that exudes of Raj nostalgia (611). These films portray an alternative history to the mainstream historiography, and to do so they take recourse to works of history that have tried to project an alternative version of the negotiations that led to the Partition of India. With such representations, there is always a possibility of reducing the nuances and complexities of history, especially so when one is attempting to lay down the background politics that led to events such as the freedom of India, the Partition of India and the birth of two nation-states which eventually led to a million people being killed and more than ten million people being displaced from the land where they were born. Freedom, therefore, entailed large scale violence not against the colonial power, but rather against each other: it played out in the name of religion. It is, therefore, extremely important to look at the politics of such a representation and how they etch in the mind of the viewers a history that is simplistic and reductive.



Some of the important literary works on the theme of the Partition of India include Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories, Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1989) or Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1988). Some of the texts in Indian languages that also deal with Partition include *Partitions* by Kamaleshwar (2000), *Tamas* by Bhisham Sahni (1974), *Bakultala P.L.Camp* (2012) by Narayan Sanyal's or *The River Churning* (1968) by Jyotirmayī Debī. Jyotirmayī Debī's novel foregrounds, for example, the perspective of women who have been victims of Partition. *Tamas*, which deals with the communal tension and strife in a district town in West Punjab before the Partition in 1946, was later adapted to a television film by Govind Nihalini. It is extremely difficult to address the issue of violence directly without taking sides, or the possibility of a true and nuanced representation of whatever has happened is an extremely difficult, if not an impossible, act. Literature, therefore, seeks to primarily concentrate on stories usually narrated from the perspective of the victim rather than addressing the larger, rather incomprehensible, political negotiations that were taking place. These stories have tried to scale the impossibility of understanding such big historical events microscopically from the point of view of the individual.

In terms of cinematographic representation, there have also been several attempts to represent and understand the Partition. We are reminded immediately of Ritwik Ghatak's trilogy *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961), and *Subarnarekha* (1962). Ritwik Ghatak deals with the impact of Partition on displaced individuals, on the refugees struggling to survive and the insecurities that displacement entailed after being uprooted from one's own place. Like Manto, Ghatak could not come to terms with the Partition of the country and was obsessed with it throughout his life. Ghatak's association with the Indian People Theatre Association, which was a cultural wing of the Communist Party of India, had a tremendous influence on him, and so he always felt that film was a vehicle to uphold and address social issues. The trilogy was also a part of this endeavour. Ghatak's films have an endearing appeal because of the nuanced portrayal of the suffering of women, the insecurities faced by the refugees and caste problems, and his portrayal of strong women characters, such as Nita, Anasuya and Seeta, whose struggle and suffering is often the main focus of the story, reflects the trauma of cultural divide, displacement and Partition.

Gurinder Chadha's film is different because it focuses on the political negotiations that led to the Partition of India. The movie attempts to portray a different understanding of history by drawing attention to the Viceroy's House, where Lord Mountbatten and his family arrived to expedite the process of the transfer of power. The other strand of the narrative is the love story of Jeet and Aaliya, both of whom work in the Viceroy's house and are privy to the unfolding of greater historical events where their individual lives get entangled. Gurinder Chadha had herself claimed that in writing the script of the film she had relied on Narendra Singh Sarila's book *The Shadow of the Great Game* (2005), which seeks to attempt to provide a different interpretation of the greater motives of the British Parliament in shaping the course of the history of the Indian subcontinent: "Studying the archives, Chadha came across confidential government documents that support a revisionist view of the lead-up to Indian independence" (Thorpe np).



The film seems to rely too much on Sarila's book and the theory of the Great Game.¹ In response to Fatima Bhutto's concern, Chadha had pointed out that she was more interested in portraying the emotional content: "I wanted to show the emotional impact, not the fighting. My maternal grandmother came to live with us in the 1970s and she was still totally traumatised. When she sat with us to watch telly she would be disturbed by conflict of any kind. We laughed at her, but she would say, 'You don't know what happened to us!'" (qtd Thorpe np). Gurinder Chadha's film begins with a scene in the Viceroy's house where the Indian workers are cleaning, dusting and wiping the Viceroy's palace in preparation for the arrival of the last Viceroy Lord Mountbatten. When one is dealing with a theme that has tremendous historical relevance and where the sensitivity of so many people can be disturbed, and one has to get the act together in not more than three hours, such a scene seems to be superfluous in keeping with the gravity of the situation. It portrays the Indians in a servile light and does not add to the storyline of the film. Jeet Kumar is the recruit to the Viceroy's house, and he immediately praises Lord Mountbatten for freeing Burma. He is in the service of Mountbatten as he expects him to free India from colonial rule. Fatima Bhutto is critical of the film and points out that "[t]he empire and its descendants have their fingerprints all over this story." (np) She's concerned that "[t]he benevolence of the Mountbattens and, by association, the British Raj is laced throughout Chadha's film." Here there are no freedom fighters, that is, their characters are never brought into focus or portrayed at length, nor is there any footage/discussion of the events of the effect of the non-violent struggle of Gandhi, or other efforts made by the great Indian freedom fighters.

The historical background is empty, the film begins in a sort of vacuum and what is important here is the exotic spectacle of the dressing up of the Viceroy's house and the Indian housekeepers preparing the stage for it. Aaliya is here assigned to take care of Pamela who happens to be Mountbatten's daughter. Aaliya and Jeet seem to know each other before they have come to work in the Viceroy's house. Jeet had helped Aaliya's father when he was in jail and they have since then fallen in love with each other. As they meet each other again in the Viceroy's house, the director, it seems, is too bent on portraying a strict decorum in how men and women might meet and talk to each other. So the film also triggers the quintessential theme of a love story in times of war. It reminds us of the portrayal of Tridib and May in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), where the physical love story of both the characters is brought to an end, as Tridib dies in Dhaka in the riots trying to protect his grandfather. Tridib's memory lives on and interacts with the narrator, as his growing up is shaped by memory and as he seeks, along with the other characters, to understand the reason behind Tridib's death. The Partition

¹ In this context the Great Game implied that Great Britain wanted to create a buffer state between the British and the Russian empire and the creation of a supportive state like Pakistan would provide them secure access to Afghanistan, Central and South Asia and the oil trade. They believed that the Congress with socialist leanings and an United India would not go against the Soviet Union.



and the riots thereafter continuously hover in the background as individuals make sense of their historical destiny. Not so in Chaddha's film: the lovers Jeet and Aaliya are united in extraordinary circumstances. A small act of reparation that the film concedes besides its love for the Mountbattens.

Another important trope of Chadha's film is the space of the kitchen which acts as a mini theatre where the tremors of the impact of the larger political policies are played out on a miniature scale. Here we get to know the reactions of the ordinary people and their understanding of the situation. We also find that the Hindu and the Muslim workers are not at peace with each other and are made to work together by the authority of the British masters. This thread is very fragile, as the threat of Partition looms large over the apparent peace that is maintained in the Viceroy's house.

Mountbatten is shown in a sympathetic light, as his family is immediately critical of the policies of Churchill and talks about the power of Gandhi challenging the Empire. His wife and daughter are aware of the greatness of the job at hand. The superfluity of the scene of Lord Mountbatten dressing up in his Viceroy's robes again seems to distract the audience. The purpose of the scene remains ambiguous as to whether the scene seeks to reinforce the servility of the Indians, or the superiority of the dressing sense of Mountbatten, or, for that matter, the sense of time that will become important to the policies of Mountbatten, or, is it that the 'dressing up' is in the process of becoming an important symbol in the film. Lord Mountbatten is immediately warned by Lady Mountbatten that the job at hand is not an easy one and, she states, "Let's not make a mess of it" (00:07:35-00:07:37). Mountbatten slowly becomes aware of the enormity of the task, the 'Operation Madhouse', that has been assigned to him. It seems that the film looks at history from the perspective of the Mountbattens, unlike other films based on the Partition such as *Tamas*, where the perspective is not that of the victors, but of the victim.

As I have earlier discussed, there are a lot of scenes that seem to me to be frivolous and undermine the seriousness of the issues that have been dealt with. One of the scene displays how food is provided for the pet dog, and the manner in which it is done provides a sort of comic relief not only at the cost of the servility of the Indians, but also speaks of the grandiloquence of the affairs at the Viceroy's house (00:12:05-00:12:35). Lady Mountbatten and her companion themselves guzzle on the food, while the Indian servants are bemused by the impropriety of the act. Similarly when projecting Gandhi for the first time what strikes out is his interest in the curd made of goat milk, which he is prepared to share with the Mountbattens (00:44:00-00:46:03). Amidst all these, we are constantly reminded of the rancour taking place in the background as the Hindu and the Muslim workers are prepared to fight with each other at the earliest opportunity.

The Mountbattens are projected in a very sympathetic light, more as a victim of the grand designs of the British Parliament rather than as the ones who are primarily responsible for carrying out the Partition of India. The discord between the Hindus and the Muslims seems to compel Mountbatten to bring the timeline forward so that the British would not be held responsible for the mismanagement. Aaliya and Jeet, the two Indian protagonists, bestow their faith on the Mountbattens. Pug



extolls Mountbatten's qualities as the one who could "charm a vulture off a corpse" (00:21:12-00:21:16) and ironically the film also proceeds in a similar direction, charming the reader away from history. Lady Mountbatten is always projected as the one who is sympathetic to the Indian cause. She is the one who is continuously pressing on Mountbatten not to divide India. She also seeks to bring out some reforms in the Viceroy's house by inviting Indian guests, especially Indian women; she rushes off to the kitchen to praise the food made by the Indian cooks. She can also be found busy supervising the relief work (01:33:52-01:34:05), whereas Nehru appears helpless, and in fact gets slapped for what he and his fellow politicians have done to the country (01:34:24-01:35:59).

The British policy of *divide-et-impera* is not given much focus in the film, although the politicians harp on the policies of Britain in dividing the Hindus and the Muslims of the country. Chadha displays, instead, the immediacy of what happens in the kitchen, in the Viceroy's house and the wedding party takes over. Radcliff and Mountbatten are all concerned with the "fairness of the thing" (01:16:42-01:18:53). Radcliff reveals to Mountbatten, the policy document given to him by Lord Ismay that contained the grand designs of the Parliament in partitioning India and their interest to preserve the balance of power with regard to their opposition to the Soviet Union and to maintain an advantageous position in the oil trade (01:20:55-01:22:15). The plan, Lord Mountbatten realises, is a foregone conclusion, drawn almost two years ago in a policy document by Winston Churchill (01:24:02-01:26:34). Like Nehru, Jinnah and Gandhi, Mountbatten too has been played to carry out the larger interests of the British empire. Mountbatten's romanticised personal life and his concerns for India as is projected in the film seems to absolve him of any wrongdoing or partitioning the country. The absurdity of the Partition is revealed in the way the things of the Viceroy's house is distributed among the two countries; and the focus on the issue that both sides meticulously are clamouring for the same in the 80-20 ratio of dividing the assets and liabilities between India and Pakistan seems to blame the national leaders instead of the British in propagating such an absurd plan.

Films can serve as an important site for the dissemination of information, ideas, projections to a huge audience, more so when one is dealing with a historical event that has tremendous ramification for the past and the future. The visual medium in the present age reaches a much larger viewership than the written medium. A historical event that had curved up the fortunes of two nations should have been dealt with much greater sensitivity and historical accuracy. Gurinder Chadha's allegiances in making this film, therefore, needs to be questioned. Chadha positions the viewer within a medley of situations amidst an exotic spectacle, a romance somewhat fulfilled, the "maa-baap" (literally mother and father, here implying the role of the colonizer as a guardian) like concern of the Mountbatten family and the violence in a partitioned country. In Chadha's film, the sympathies seem misplaced, and although the violence of the partition is not directly projected, there is a violence that lurks in the background, the violence to History. Chadha rather focuses on the exotic and the spectacular and the film can be classified to be part of the genre of romance. It is in direct contrast to what we find in Ken McMullen's film where the partitioned spaces demands a sort of fragmentary narrative.



The film *Partition* (1987) directed by Ken McMullen was made exactly after forty years of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. The film, commissioned by Channel 4, is a very complex and nuanced artistic adaptation of Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh" (2008a: 9-15). Saadat Hasan Manto is one of the greatest short story writers of the Indian subcontinent who wrote in Urdu and who himself suffered the trauma of migration, as he had to leave Mumbai and move to Lahore in Pakistan. His stories about the Partition are very passionate, direct and truthful, and reveal the trauma of Partition. In one of the stories of Manto, "Colder than Ice" (16-20), we find the protagonist Ishwar Singh inhabiting both the spaces of the subject and the object of violence. The spaces in Manto's stories dissolve as the familiar world has broken apart. In "Khol Do" (2008b), the violence of Partition seems to have erased the space between the dead and the living, as Sakina's corpse unties her salwar. As in "Toba Tek Singh," we find that in the madness of violence, familiar boundaries of spaces have been disrupted. Ken McMullen's adaptation also utilises the idea of disruption of familiar spaces and the sanity/insanity divide, as is found in many of Manto's short stories. The film's script, which adapts "Toba Tek Singh," was written by Tariq Ali, who himself is an activist, journalist, historian and has authored many books. The film was produced within ten days, and it is a multi-layered and complex film dealing with the handover of the power by the British to the Indians and the negotiations and exploration of the reasons behind the Partition of India.

The film is not a linear historical exploration of the events that led to the Partition, rather it is a symbolic representation of the motives behind the Partition of India. It is never easy to adapt a five-page short story and transform it into a film: what Ken McMullen has done is not just adapt the short story to a film, but explore the several dimensions of the short story and allow it to mediate our understanding of the traumatic event. The film, therefore, occupies two different spaces: one is the map room where the civil servants discuss and argue about the division of the country, and the other is an asylum where the inmates are concerned with the Partition and their location in that indeterminate space between the two new political borders that were being drawn. The two spaces, however, spill into one another producing a rich texture of meanings. These are two large rooms, the asylum is bigger than the map room and is characterized by a tree at the centre. The tree extends to several dark corners, spaces which have been magnificently utilized in the film. The map room, on the other hand, is characterized by the large maps of India and the ceiling fans looming large over the head of the characters, a reminder of the heat outside of the room. The major actors in the map room drama, such as Sayeed Jaffrey and Roshan Seth, play different characters in both the stages and this parallelism subtly allows the metaphor of sanity and insanity to spread its wings over the entire film.

The intertextuality in the characters that these actors play in historical films, the repository that they have created by acting in films related to the Raj, also resonate in the viewer's mind as to the subtle layers of meaning that are created from the filmic 'textual' field. In this context, Graham Allen states that "reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which



exists between a text and all other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations” (2-3). Here, ‘reading’ can as well be replaced by ‘viewing’. I am immediately reminded that Roshan Seth was Jawaharlal Nehru in Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi* (1982) released just five years before this film. Roshan Seth also played the role of Nehru in the 53-episode TV series by Doordarshan, *Bharat Ek Khoj* (1988). The series was based on Jawaharlal Nehru’s book *The Discovery of India* (1946) which explores almost five thousand years of Indian history finally leading to the independence from the British. The series was aired just a year after the film *Partition* was released. In the public imagination, Roshan Seth is etched as Nehru and such resonances create and generates in the readers’ mind a subtle play of symbolism. Saeed Jaffrey’s family also suffered the pangs of Partition and many of his relatives migrated to Pakistan. Saeed Jaffrey played Sardar Patel in *Gandhi* and the Nawab of Meerut in *The Jewel in the Crown*, a British television serial in 1984 which represented the final days of the Raj based on Paul Scott’s Raj Quartet novels.

Zohra Sehgal who plays a very significant choric role in the movie *Partition*, that of Everywoman, also played the role of an Anglo-Indian lady, Lady Lili Chatterjee in *The Jewel in the Crown*. The resonances of the several characters that these actors have played in films often dealing with the Indian independence, in terms of similarities and dissimilarities, creates a sort of symbolic continuity across films. Zohra Sehgal is privy to both the stages as she is the Everywoman who observes and comments on the goings-on of both stages. She carries on incessantly with her acts of cleansing, sweeping, dusting and wiping: despite it the mirror will forever break. It reminds us of Lady Macbeth washing her hands to remove the blood of Duncan (Shakespeare 139). No act of cleansing will ever be able to wipe the violence of Partition.

In the opening scene (00:01:14-00:3:14), Zohra Sehgal plays the role of Everywoman sweeping the courtyard of the asylum and seen through a veil. She removes it after two minutes giving us a glimpse of the world that lies, beyond the gates of history or even normalcy, as we peep into a world that is often beyond our comprehension. Her face is that of one who has endured a lot of suffering and in that process has gained empathy: she is the chorus of the earlier plays grown wiser with age and observation. It is through her eyes and narration that we see and seek to comprehend whatever is happening behind the veil. She also wipes the mirror (00:00:51-00:01:14). McMullen’s use of the mirror is rich and dense. Beyond these two spaces lies the contemporary newsreel that intervenes with the continuity of the spaces and reminds us of what was happening in the outside world.

The director does not take recourse to the portrayal of violence, but rather focusses on the intensity of emotions. In the background, we can hear the voice of Nehru and his famous speech after India achieved freedom from the colonial yoke, while in the foreground we have the mutterings of Toba Tek Singh, and amidst most of his nonsensical utterings, we can hear the words ‘partition’ and ‘retribution’ (00:03:50-00:04:30). The English has failed in the role of ‘Maa Baap,’ the colonial parent, and has left India in tatters. The monochromatic opening scene of the mental asylum is then replaced by the vividness of the red colour with Leonie Mellinger



seated at a grand piano and wondering about the “million British graves in India” (00:05:14-00:05:34). Her words, “who will look after them now” are ironic, when considered from the perspective of the Indians (00:05:14-00:05:34). The image of John Shrapnel, who plays the role of the General,² fills up the map room. He appears perplexed, confounded and despairing over the situation and says that in the given situation the British could not have continued to hold on to power. The reflections in the mirror take on a symbolic dimension as it is through them that we seek to penetrate the soul. In an interview, McMullen talks about his use of mirrors: “The mirrors extend the whole plane of action in Partition, doubling and then quadrupling the spatial possibilities. Furthermore the mirror, as Plato says, is the way the ‘soul’ identifies its true self [...] in the case of John Shrapnel’s character, it allows the articulation of deep misgivings about imperial policy.” (np).

The inmates are finding it difficult to understand what and where Pakistan is. Saeed Jaffrey, in the garb of the inmate, comments “Pakistan is a place in India where they make cut throat razors” (00:09:13-00:10:01). Zohra Sehgal’s whispering voice takes over and suggests that the apparent calm prevailing in the asylum should not deceive us, as the inmates here are worried about the displacement that may be caused due to Partition (00:10:09-00:10:50). We are made aware that Toba Tek Singh had once expressed the wish that he wants to be buried in the ancestral village. The inmates are clueless about the situation (00:09:10-00:13:01). The scene moves from one space to the other, from monochrome to colour, but in both the spaces we find that there is a general sense of despair and incomprehension. The character performed by Sehgal incessantly goes on with her wiping outside the door of the map room and observes “Even they don’t understand what they have done.” (00:15:38-00:16:31), which seems almost to have a Biblical echo: “forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). We also get to know from her that some English officers have relented to stay on for another six months to ease the transfer of power (00:15:38-00:17:30).

Even in the map room, where the civil servants are discussing the transfer of power and the Partition of India, the division of assets and liabilities are given due importance, and that is when the pressing issue of the ‘lunatics’³ creeps up (00:17:31-00:19:23). The discussion that follows about them have a tinge of absurdity and that carries over the symbolism of madness to the entire film. The civil servant observes that “[t]heir [the mentally challenged] minds have escaped” (00:20:13-00:21:15).

² He could as well be a civil servant representing the British. I prefer to call him the General as he is often seen in a military uniform and is a figure of authority. Ken McMullen doesn’t name his characters which further plays on the subtle symbolism of sanity. They could be civil servants, diplomats or even politicians. While describing the different events that take place in this film I have taken recourse to the name of the actors.

³ The film uses the term ‘lunatic,’ ‘lunies’ and ‘lunatic asylum’ to describe the mentally challenged inmates and the mental asylum. The same can also be found in the translated text of ‘Toba Tek Singh’ (2008a, 9). As these terms might seem offensive, I will hereafter use the terms ‘inmates,’ ‘mentally challenged person’ and ‘mental asylum.’



They get angry when people see them from the outside of the gates of the asylum. In this context, Roshan Seth observes, “[s]o one must see and not be seen” (00:20:13-00:21:15) and equates the role of the hidden spectator to how the British saw us: “India was somewhere outside, that was their power” (00:20:13-00:21:15). Saeed Jaffrey, meditating on the same issues, talks about the architecture of England: that it is built like this and observes “an architecture that allowed those inside to be under constant observation” (00:20:13-00:21:15). The meditation on the mentally challenged leads them to discussions on how the British had so long been able to maintain their power over India.

The inmates in the asylum are confused with the space that they are now inhabiting, whether it is in Pakistan or India. An inmate, almost naked, crawling and dragging himself in the ground is playing God. Toba asks him whether Toba Tek Singh is in India or Pakistan, to which God replies “Neither in India nor in Pakistan” (00:25:39-00:27:46). This is ironical in the sense that Toba will ultimately die in the no man’s land on the border of India and Pakistan. The discussion further leads to the connection between the two spaces, as “God” here says “I have received a delegation of ship, goats and donkeys. They want to have a special round table discussion” (00:25:39-00:27:46), probably a telling commentary of what was happening in the map room.

We also come to know that for the last sixteen years Toba’s daughter has visited him in the asylum. She has now come to say goodbye to her father with a heavy heart as their family will migrate to India leaving forever their ancestral village. This poignant scene is symbolic of the millions of people being uprooted from their place of birth and thereby being robbed of their identity. In India it is this rootedness to ancestral place which provides continuity and defines them. The politicians, the civil servants and their colonial power had managed to dislodge the people of India.

The film also touches upon the mutiny of the Connaught Rangers (1920), which links the politics of Britain regarding the Partition of India to a much larger global perspective and Britain’s greater imperial designs. Dally’s reburial in Ireland also stirred up public interest in Ireland. By touching on the mutiny of Connaught rangers, the film relates the partition of Ireland of 1921 and the partition of India to the divide-and-rule policies of a retreating empire, who by hook or by crook wanted to maintain its place in the world. By referring to the Connaught rangers, the film forges links with issues of global interest and thus expands and interconnects the different strands of history related to the Partition. The trains, which were a proud symbol of British imperialism, had metamorphosed to dumb spectators and carriers of Death, and it can be argued that the political trajectory of the last days of the British in India was in a similar vein. Roshan Seth rightly points out that “[w]ar has drained your economy and your will to power” (00:55:28-00:55:47). The only safeguard during the Partition riots was the colour of the skin and ironically it was the whites that were spared. Johnny Boy in the asylum has gone mad driving the trains and witnessing the massacres that happened on the trains. Zohra comments, “for six months his trains became like moving graveyards” (00:35:55-00:37:49).



The film pivots around a brilliant ten-minute shot in the asylum where Sayeed Jaffrey rants out the most important speech in the movie: “What have you done to my world! For six months, quietly, I have been listening to your crimes [...] What have you done to my world? Bastards, criminals, traitors and butchers! What have you done to my world! Even the monsoon this year is evil. It is raining red” (00:37:49-00:39:35). The speech is followed by contemporary reels of people lying dead in the streets, people carrying dead bodies and fire blazing the houses, as Zohra seems to open the gates of the asylum. The scene is poignant in its lyrical intensity and that a mentally challenged person, the outsider, has to render such a speech, plays on the idea of sanity. The theatricality of the speech brings out the sense of utter destruction that has ushered in. It embodies the fear that the world which one inhabited will never be the same again.

As in Chadha’s film, this film also comments on the larger imperial policies of Britain. The theory that was mentioned in Chadha’s film, based on Sarila’s book, was that India was partitioned keeping in mind larger political interests of Great Britain related to its opposition to Russia, and it is also suggested here. Saeed Jaffrey, while playing the role of one of the civil servant in McMullen’s film, is seen talking to the General and suggesting that one of the causes of the Partition could be to create “[a] totally hundred per cent reliable state on the edges of the Soviet Union” (00:40:20-00:41:12). The two scenes, where one to one conversion takes place between the General and the two civil servants, Roshan Seth and Saeed Jaffrey, separately are meditations on the causes of Partition and are reminders of McMullen’s intended title of the film, which was *Ten Meditations on Partition* (McMullen).

Like the reference to the Connaught Rangers, the film also refers to the mutiny of the Royal Indian navy, that is, the insurrection of the Royal Indian Navy against the British Government in India in 1946. The revolt had initially sparked off with protests against food and living conditions in the navy, and it soon spread to different corners of the country taking on a singular nature. The major politicians such as Gandhi, Vallabhbhai Patel and Jinnah, asked the leaders to call off the strike. The mutiny could not garner political support from the Indian politicians and was, therefore, quelled. The stories of the INA and its leader Subhas Chandra Bose inspired the leaders of the mutiny. There were several mutinies in the Indian Navy as well as in the Indian Air Force since 1943. In the film, Madan Lal appears as a naval recruit and he is depressed at the failure of the mutiny and the lack of political support. In the General’s conversation with Roshan Seth, the civil servant, the latter meditates about the nature of the British rule. He comments that “for hundred years the British held a veil between us and power” (01:01:56-01:02:27). The film uses many symbols to unfold the complexity of meaning, and the veil and mirror help us are in our understanding of the events of Partition.

In another important scene the space of the civil servants spills over to the space of the inmates, Roshan Seth in a long shot walks from the map room to the asylum and we can hear the sounds of the train and the rain in the background (01:02:02-01:07:25). The scene emphasises the continuity of both the spaces and it becomes more and more unclear as to who are the ones who are actually mentally challenged. The line between sanity and insanity thus becomes blurred. The inmates



are not willing to board the van that has come to take them away (1:11:39-01:13:18). They run around the vehicle and try desperately to avoid it. The pathos of the scene is relieved by the resistance that these inmates offer. It is the 30th of August, 1947, and the transfer of the inmates is going to take place. At the same time, it is raining heavily, and we observe the footage of the British leaving India and boarding the ship. In a most poignant scene, Toba Tek Singh refuses to cross the border and in the process falls down and dies in the no man's land between India and Pakistan (01:13:8-01:15:13). The film ends poetically with Sehgal greatly grieved, wiping the mirror and reciting in Hindi the poem, "What is broken is broken" ("Shishon ka masiha koi nahin") by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, as the mirror finally breaks down (01:15:27-01:16:28). The reference to Faiz is very pertinent, as Faiz himself was disillusioned by the Partition and foresaw it as a "poisoned chalice" (Hashmi). It also reminds us of his poem, "Dawn of Freedom" (123).

Both Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House* and Ken McMullen's *Partition* confront the politics of the time. *Viceroy's House* focusses more on the position of Lord Mountbatten, Jinnah and Nehru concerning the Partition of India. Chadha's film is primarily a commercial endeavour, whose purpose it seems is to exonerate the Viceroy by focusing on his personal life and charisma. Chadha's representation silences the complexities of history. It is a film that is extravagant in the use of location and exotic in nature and follows the conventional formula of a love story and its portrayal of history requires at the end the suffering of Chadha's own family to provide a first-hand authentication and legitimacy to the story. Ken McMullen's *Partition* adopts an artful approach to cinema, extremely nuanced in its portrayal of the Partition with variegated shades of meaning: not only is it a faithful adaptation of Saadat Hassan Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh" but it is an interpretation of it as well. The empathy in Chadha's film seems to lie more with the Mountbatten family, whereas in McMullen's film the sensitivity and responsiveness is embodied in the character of Everywoman. She is the ancient storyteller who observes everything in the light of empathy, insignificant and helpless to change the course of history, but lives to tell the tale.

The Partition of India has been a violent blow to the idea of the possibility of convergences between the idea of nation and the idea of the community. The continuity of the partitioned spaces will seek to disrupt social and political life in the subcontinent as was evidenced in the 1964 riots in Bangladesh, the Delhi riots in 1984 as well as in other acts of terrorism and in continuous challenges to the borders. In both films, violence is lurking in the background, not directly portrayed, but ominously present in its absence. The shadow lines of Partition have led to a perpetual cartographic instability in the subcontinent. Cinema in its own way has sought to unveil the silence that has followed the violence, to understand the violence, to confront it, even if it is with a sort of lyrical pessimism. Cinema about Partition can often be reparative, for it can fill up the gaps in the official history, rise above nationalist or even colonialist triumphalism, it can also be reductive and silencing, playing with the truth and the memories of the viewers. How does cinema articulate the incomprehensible in terms of a narrative? The question remains whether we confront head on with the violence that was the Partition or leave it behind and



bury it as an aberration. We are reminded of Krishna Sobti, a writer and a refugee of Partition, who once said that Partition was difficult to forget but dangerous to remember (qtd Butalia 357).

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