

Research Article

LITERATURE AND HISTORY THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF CINEMA

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Received 22th April 2021; Accepted 21th May 2021; Published online 30th June 2021

ABSTRACT

The essay talks about the alignment of Literature, History and Film by the representation of Partition of India in 1947 in two novels of the twentieth century and their film adaptations trying to find the modes of intersexuality and dynamics in these mediums.

Keywords: Partition, fiction, trauma, history, Film, representation.

INTRODUCTION

There is an interesting relationship between literature and history. All of the modern history that we have read in school and college text books becomes real and tangible when we read about it in literature. What the film does however, is to give it another perspective; a three-dimensional one. My presentation here today is to talk about this alignment in a way where the suitability of each of these mediums can be ascertained with relation to their individualistic traits and advantages but also try to understand the contradictions which arise with this alignment. The books that I intend to examine are the ones based on actual history and the films are the adaptations of these books. In this sense, the essence of history is being seen through the lens of literature and another perspective being explored is that of how a film based on a literary work can present history in a way which becomes interesting and complex. Through the researching of this paper, I found this three-way alignment and association of ideas in exploring these genres extremely productive. The two books that I intend to explore are based on the Partition of the Indian sub-continent in the year 1947. These are *Ice Candy Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa and *Pinjar* by Amrita Pritam. The two films based on these are *Earth 1947* by Deepa Mehta and *Pinjar* by Chandra Prakash Dwivedi.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Partition was the single-most traumatic event in Indian history which can only be compared to the Holocaust of the mid-19th century. The number of people who were killed, abducted, raped and injured is mind-boggling. Due to a decision taken by the British Government which was ruling over the Indian sub-continent, scores of people belonging to the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities were told to shift from Pakistan to India and vice versa in accordance to the community they belonged to. As no infrastructure was set up to facilitate this movement, people were forced to undertake this long journey with their goods and family either on foot or travelling through over-crowded trains. There was a lot of enmity among the communities which flared up due to this hasty and illogical decision by the government. This led to riots which started in early 1947 and continued in different parts of the sub-continent for more than two years. During this time, people travelling in caravans to India or

Pakistan were attacked by the opposing community, they were looted, marauded, women were abducted and raped, men, women and children were killed viciously in their homes and communities, their houses were broken into and their valuables stolen. The women were the worst victims of Partition as their bodies were the markers of vengeance for the rival Hindu and Muslim communities. In times of war and civil strife, women's bodies become the markers of their men's honor. Thus, the rape of a woman is emblematic of the rape of the community she belongs to. As Veena Das puts it: To plunder women's bodies perceived as men's property was to indicate that the memory had occupied the most intimate possessions of the men to whom the women belonged. On women's bodies thus, the 'political programs' of the mutual enemies were prescribed. (Das, 1999)

ANALYSIS OF ICE CANDY MAN AND EARTH 1947

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice Candyman* is an interesting novel seen through the perspective of Lenny, a Parsi girl-child. The novel is based in pre-partition Lahore and talks about the dynamics of a society about to fall apart. It is significant to note that Sidhwa's novel is based partially on her own childhood experiences as a child who witnessed firsthand the traumatic conditions of the Partition era. However, by traversing the narrative through Lenny's eyes, Sidhwa makes the perspective as objective as possible. Lenny is seen in an environment; she does not fully understand. Her gaze is childlike and although she is a precocious child, it is Sidhwa's perspective which is visible whenever the narrative becomes complex. Being a Parsi, a community which was neutral in their opinion about the Partition, Sidhwa is not taking sides but it is quite apparent that her inclination is towards the Muslims and she is in favor of Jinnah and not Gandhi. Hence the narrative has a tendency to veer towards an adult voice taking over at significant points in the novel. Lenny's perspective is interesting stemming from a mind which is not fully grown and yet which tries to struggle with all her experiences and adventures with Ayah. She tries to understand all of the different people she comes into contact with. Ayah is the central figure in the novel. She is young, a Hindu, attractive and hence a pivot around whom the motley group of men revolve constantly. These men belong to different communities, different faiths, different professions and yet in Ayah's presence, they lose their individual enmities and gather around her in the Queen's Garden to win her short-lived attention. Lenny enjoys these times of abandon and adventure with Ayah. She admires Ayah for managing to sustain the attention of so many varied men and realizes that Ayah is like a magnet for those around her. Ayah too, is flattered by all the attention she gets and can be seen as an

empowered woman in these times of crisis. However, she is also a Hindu and hence a token for a religion which was not acceptable to a lot of people in the city of Lahore in Pakistan, the newly created country. According to some critics, Ayah is the symbol of undivided India about to be torn apart, violated and ravaged. The narrative builds up to a constant crescendo taking us through the Hindu-Muslim riots in Shalmi, a Hindu-dominated area of Lahore, the train full of dead bodies including the Ice candy Man's dead sisters and reaches its peak when in the midst of a Muslim crowd full of angry men, Ice candy man manipulates the child Lenny into betraying her family's trust leading him towards the bedroom where Ayah is hiding. This is where the novel turns into a traumatic tale of a single Hindu woman being abducted in full public view by the opposing community and the entire Parsi household portrayed as a helpless victim of the riots. What Sidhwa is doing is to delve into the mind of this child Lenny who finds it really tough to forgive herself for this betrayal of her Ayah. This insight gives the child her own perspective of the Partition, something that we don't come across ordinarily in Partition literature. Ice candy man is also a complex character. He is seen adopting different professions depending on the season. He is flexible, extremely fond of Ayah and constantly flirting with her in the garden and elsewhere. However, after his sisters die in the riots, he undergoes a transformation and becomes vengeful and rigid. He is instrumental in the Ayah's abduction and is not ashamed of it even though he manipulates Lenny to accomplish this. The novel provides a closure of sorts by letting the readers find the Ayah's whereabouts. However, the narrative weakens a little after the scene of Ayah's abduction. Lenny's efforts to search for Ayah with the help of Godmother seem contrived and without any purpose. Sidhwa feels guilty about her central character and tries to bring Ayah to a kind of resolution which seems a bit superficial. This is why the film adaptation of the Ice candy man is more successful than the novel. The film titled 'Earth 1947' by Deepa Mehta does everything possible to shorten the narrative and make it more appropriate for a feature film. For Deepa Mehta, Partition had always been important and she wanted to make the international audience aware about this event of Partition, dismissed ever so often in History books. Having inherited this legacy from her grandparents, Mehta picked up this story precisely because of its authenticity and candor. The partition had to be filmed because according to Mehta in a 1999 interview:

"The choice to depict India's partition on screen came about as a response to the silence of the tragedy by Western filmmakers...if you ask anyone from the Punjab today, and we are talking third generation, what does 1947 mean to you, they will never say the independence of India. They all say the partition of India. Every family member has some story to tell. It was a Holocaust."

Deepa Mehta concentrates on the central narrative of Lenny, removes a number of extraneous characters like Colonel Bharucha, Godmother and Electric aunt to make the film more compact and precise in its focus. The film does achieve what the novel could not. A vision of the Partition for the viewers, a collage of the colors of blood and violence mixed with the colors of Holi, a Hindu festival which teaches unity in diversity and here as an ironical contrast. Some key scenes from the novel, Lenny breaking a plate and wondering if it can be put together again, tearing a doll apart after witnessing the riots and the killings and foreshadowing the abduction and rape of Ayah by the Muslim marauders are beautifully shot in the film. The metaphors of the novel are therefore aptly portrayed in the film. According to John Dean in an essay titled 'Adapting History and literature into Movies' (published in the American Studies Journal 2009, issue 53)

"A movie gets to places literature and history do not; and then it delivers that place to its audience in a way that literature and history cannot. With literature and history, the audience sees with their inner eye, not as much with their outer, physical eye."

In this way Deepa Mehta's film *Earth 1947* is a beautifully accomplished adaptation of a novel which is an authentic tale of Partition of the Indian sub-continent.

ANALYSIS OF PINJAR THE NOVEL AND THE FILM:

The writer Amrita Pritam's book *Pinjar* originally written in Punjabi and subsequently translated into Hindi and English is the other text that I will take up now and then a comparative analysis of the novel with its film adaptation will be attempted. Amrita Pritam is a poet, writer, novelist born in the year 1919. She died in 2005 after a renowned career spanning six decades. Her most prominent novel is *Pinjar* which was first published in 1950. In this novel, Amrita Pritam narrates the gendered experience of trauma and the sufferings of Partition. The novel is about the journey of the young Puro on the verge of her marriage and then her abduction by Rashid, a Muslim due to an existing family feud which has lasted for generations. The Hindu Puro is abducted, and married to Rashid. The transformation, not just of her identity but also her life is a trauma that Puro survives by becoming Hamida and after being turned away by her own parents, she has no choice but to accept her fate and live her life with Rashid. This was a pattern religiously followed by the two communities to avenge on each other during partition. The rape and violation of the women of one community by the other was seen as destroying the honor of their men. As Ritu Menon points out in her book *Borders and Boundaries* "The material, symbolic and political significance of abduction of women was simultaneously an assertion of identity and humiliation of the rival community through the appropriation of its women." Puro's life with Rashid is very similar to her being a skeleton (the literal meaning of the word *Pinjar*). She keeps remembering her past as a happy girl and her nostalgia is her only sustenance in this household. She is initially repulsed with her own child but eventually makes a compromise. As Hamida, she meets a number of women in the village who are the victims of gendered violence like Taro, Kammo and Lajo. Taro is suffering from an unknown disease and is disowned by her husband. He forces Taro to become a prostitute and exploits her in every way possible. Kammo is a motherless child living with her aunt as she has been disowned by her father. She is ill-treated by her aunt. She and Puro/Hamida cannot be together as the latter is a Muslim. Lajo, who is Ramchand's sister, the man Puro was engaged to, has been abducted by the Muslims. Puro shows immense strength in helping her escape her abductors. What Amrita Pritam shows here is the oppression of women in a double bind of patriarchy and dislocation. These women suffer from different levels of oppression. They are living under the patriarchal regime which takes away their voices and silences them. They suffer at the hands of their fathers and their husbands. They are abducted, raped and violated by the men of the rival community in the times of war and sometimes even killed by their own family members to protect the honor of their community. They suffer after accepting their dislocation to a different community and are forced to accept identities which they are unable to accept in their minds. The physical, psychological and emotional trauma remains in them and they silence themselves as a consequence. Puro is differently portrayed in the novel for her courage, her acceptance and yet her becoming a savior of all the other oppressed women around her. Puro shows immense courage in the face of adversity by sustaining these oppressed, tortured women and showing them a path, which will redeem them. The women Taro,

Kammo and Lajo represent the victimization of women during turbulent times and their bodies which become the sites of violence and trauma. It is Puro who is determined to save these women. Another aspect of Partition and the emerging sense of communalism leads us to the portrayal of 'Pagli' or the mad woman in the narrative who becomes a metaphor of violence when she is raped and impregnated by her perpetrator. She roams around the village, half-naked and is oblivious of her condition. After the birth of her baby, Puro and Rashid take care of the child for almost six months when the village elders decide that the mad woman was a Hindu and her child cannot be brought up in a Muslim household. The child is forcibly taken away from them and when he becomes extremely critical for want of care, he is returned to them. Amrita Pritam is showing us the immense strength of love and care that Puro and Rashid have nurtured in their household irrespective of religion. This episode is metaphorical in so many ways, 'pagli' as the symbol of united India who is ravaged and violated and then left to the mercy of her attackers. There is still hope in this violence and trauma, a new life can be nurtured in this atmosphere. What is needed here is a respect for each other's faith and a sense of humanity without looking at each other as enemies. The novel's ending and resolution is related to another important aspect of Partition history. After the partition, the Indian government started a 'Rescue' and 'Recovery' operation which included locating the Hindu women who were abducted and forcibly taken to Pakistan and the Muslim women who had come from Pakistan after having been abducted by Hindus. The state and its patriarchal structure ensured that these women were brought back to their own countries and helped in returning to their 'homes'. More often than not, what the state wanted, did not happen. The women's families refused to accept them after they had lived in the rival communities' homes. They were thus twice abandoned and left to fend for themselves either in the recovery camps set up by the government or on the roadside. No one cared for these women whose fate had been decided by the state. This so-called 'Recovery' operation for nine years after the Partition. The novel presents this dilemma to Puro, the protagonist who is told by her brother and her ex-fiancé that she can still take a decision to return to India if she so wanted. However, Puro is sure she does not want to feel homeless again. Her home is with Rashid and she is happy to be with him. In this way, the novel gives a resolution to all those women, for whom their home mattered more than their religion. The film adaptation of Pinjar by Chandrakant Dwivedi is a faithful one but only so far as the plot is concerned. The time frame of the novel stretches over a period of almost a decade for the traumatized relationship of Puro and Rashid to reach acceptance. However, the director reduces it to two years in the film, taking away some of the credibility of the novel. The guilt, the anger and repentance portrayed by Rashid and Puro seem

contrived and lack conviction. The fact that Ramchand, with whom Puro's marriage has been fixed is an idealized figure of an educated Hindu who is translating the Ramayan into Urdu and is portrayed as possessing all the qualities of the epic hero 'Rama' and Puro picturing herself as 'Sita' in her dreams has all been incorporated in the film sequence is indicative of the director Chandra Prakash Dwivedi's ideological stance quite clearly. The subtext of the film is influenced by the right-wing political ideology of the director. This unilateral way of looking at a secular text does not help the film. Moreover, the portrayal of Rashid is that of a Muslim who has been influenced by the family to abduct Puro because of an age-old family feud. Rashid has been demonized by Dwivedi and in fact all the rapists, abductors and perpetrators in the film are always shown to be Muslims. The film's narrative is that of de-humanizing Muslims only and that is a clear demarcation from the novel that Amrita Pritam wrote. Pritam's humanistic and secular vision is nowhere in the film. Irrespective of this unilateral vision of the director, the actors especially Manoj Bajpeyi as Rashid and Urmila Matondkar as Puro have done justice to their roles.

Conclusion

What is significant here is to understand that the fiction of partition gives us an insight into the pain, suffering, dislocation, and the patriarchal oppression of women and that is precisely why we call them the worst victims of Partition. The kind of historical evidence that appears in official records does not come close to the injustice that was done to women. What the fiction writers and film-makers have done is to bring out this pain and trauma suffered by women during this calamitous event and in its aftermath. The resolution may not come immediately but the closure does happen for most of them. To conclude, the relationship between literature, history and films is a dynamic one leading us from to the other. The truth lies in their alignment and the way Partition is represented through these different genres makes us revisit this period in history and find more answers rather than sit back and ponder.

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