Beyond the Wounded Archive: Partition's Hauntings and Bombay Cinema

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Introduction

The year is 1949. It is only two years after independence and the Partition of India, and the first horror film of Hindi-Urdu cinema, the Gothic thriller, *Mahal* (*The Mansion*), is a box office hit. Spectators watch the following: it is a dark, stormy night just outside the city of Allahabad, and on the banks of the Yamuna River lies a desolate palatial mansion called Sangam Bhavan, which a young lawyer, Hari Shankar (Ashok Kumar) has just won in an auction. Shankar enters the mansion and is greeted by an elderly gardener who lives on the premises. He tells Shankar the tragic story of Sangam Bhavan's former inhabitants. The original owner built the mansion for his beloved mistress, Kamini, but drowned one night when his boat capsized in the river. Kamini died pining for him. When the gardener finishes his story, he leaves Shankar alone to explore the mansion. Shankar comes across a painted portrait of the former owner of the *mahal*, and is stunned to discover that it bears an uncanny resemblance to himself. Suddenly, the clock strikes two. Shankar hears, and then sees, an ethereal woman singing a song of intense yearning for a lover's return. This is the long dead Kamini (Madhubala) whose wandering spirit inhabits Sangam Bhavan. Convinced he has been re-born for the singular purpose of being re-united with Kamini, and willing to do anything to obtain her—including murder—Shankar descends into obsession, madness, grief, and finally, death.

Kamal Amrohi's directorial debut, *Mahal*, is a lingering cultural artifact that defies classification in the official archives of Indian independence. The film contains clues about peoples' experiences of violence (especially sexual violence) during the independence of India and creation of Pakistan in 1947. The archive of Partition is a wounded one. The frenzy of abduction, rape, murder, mutilation, destruction of property and religious sites, and theft, between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, is often said to have accompanied India's independence from British rule and its division into two separate nation-states. The violence was, however, constitutive; it was at the very heart of the event, giving shape to the archives of twentieth-century India and Pakistan, as South Asia was, for the first time, territorially divided into nations along religious lines. The archive—divided across borders, lacking documents about missing persons, and eyewitness accounts— bears the marks of Partition's wounds. What approaches have historians taken in addressing Partition violence given the limitations

of source material about ordinary people's experiences? Soon, an entire generation of Partition survivors will be gone. What sources will historians turn to when oral histories of Partition survivors are no longer possible?

In recent years, historians have responded to the shortcomings of narrating the events of 1947 with an exclusive focus on the decisions made by political elites. The notion that historical narratives with an emphasis on high politics and statistics, have been unable to do justice to the traumas people underwent during that period has led to a focus on fictional literature as a ready repository for writing a people's history of Partition. The historian Mushirul Hasan writes how "literary narratives, whether in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali or Punjabi, are an eloquent witness to 'an unspeakable and inarticulatable history'" (17-18). Historians Ayesha Jalal and Sugata Bose agree, stating that, "the colossal human tragedy of the partition and its continuing aftermath has been better conveyed by sensitive creative writers and artists…than by historians" (165). Critical writings about Partition have included ample analyses of short stories and novels written by people who lived through that time (such as the Saadat Hasan Manto, Amrita Pritam, Khushwant Singh, and Qurutulain Hyder). In turning their attention to how ordinary people lived through the turbulence, scholars have viewed literary fiction as viable source material that conveys the trauma of that time, in the absence of recorded eyewitness accounts of the violence.

Popular culture, films, and aesthetics from the 1940s and 1950s, however, have been largely ignored, as domains of every day life relate to ordinary people's experiences of Partition violence. Moreover, scholars and critics who have written about the sexual violence, the devastation of everyday life, and the injustices perpetrated against those who were rendered homeless overnight, have been confounded by how the narratives of displaced peoples are fragmentary, incoherent, and sentimental, often bordering on fantasy. Rather than investigating these phantasmagorias for what they might reveal, they have often been cast aside as sounds of silence.

In this paper, I suggest that stories from the time period in question, those that are sentimental and melodramatic, are rich spaces from which to ponder the subjectivities, ethics, and affects, circulating amidst the turbulence and displacements of 1947. I contend that collective recognition of Partition occurred across a terrain involving firstly, minoritization (Muslim minorities' involvement in early Bombay cinema) and secondly, minor genres (the Gothic as a highly unusual, as well as imported genre of film). As a ghost story, *Mahal* disrupted normative modes of Hindi cinema, which tended to focus on family order and propriety. Although *Mahal* was not explicitly about Partition, a closer reading shows that the film rendered palpable the fear, guilt, and anxiety over the disappearances and abductions of women in 1947.

While exact numbers are still unknown, it is estimated that 75,000 to 100,000 women were raped and abducted during Partition, as large convoys of people (*kafilas*) walked or traveled by trains, in the largest

mass displacement in modern human history (Menon and Bhasin 70). For much of India and Pakistan's post-independence history, the gendered violence of Partition was largely absent in public discussion. It is only recently that pioneering scholarship undertaken by feminist activists, historians, and anthropologists has brought attention to the experiences of survivors, particularly women, through an arduous collection and interpretation of oral histories.[1] If we are to retrieve some sense of collective recognition of life, especially around the sexual violence of Partition, the task for the historian is to grapple with the fragments left behind at the level of popular cultural imagination. Acknowledging that the archive is far from stable, I argue that histories about Partition must move beyond a fixation on both the state-centric, English-language colonial and national archives, as well as literary narratives by Indian and Pakistani elites often used to "fill in the gaps" of official versions of events. As Gyan Pandey has argued, histories of communal violence have typically been written in terms of a nationalist history that sees violence as an aberration, as "mere glitches, the result of an unusual conjuncture of circumstances" (33). Pandey explains, on the other hand, how such fragments pertaining to popular cultural imagination are the historical sources that are often overlooked by conventional histories.

'Muslim-ness' in Hindi-Urdu Cinema and Partition

The film, *Mahal*, was directed by Kamal Amrohi (1918-1993), an Urdu poet from a middle-class Muslim family of UP (Uttar Pradesh). He moved to Lahore in the late 1930s, and then migrated to Bombay where he was involved in the nascent film industry as a screenplay writer. Amrohi belonged to a generation of Urdu writers seeking employment in Bombay cinema due to a decline of the Urdu presses in urban North India, as Hindi, to the detriment of Urdu, acquired greater patronage. The Urdu-phone intelligentsia was made up of urban North Indian Muslim writers, poets, and journalists, many of whom belonged to the burgeoning, leftist and progressive literary movement of the 1930s and 1940s. They composed song lyrics and wrote screenplays for post-independence Bombay films, as Anand Vivek Taneja has noted, "pitched not in a register of celebration for the teleological 'progressive' move into the brand new future of newly independent India, but in registers of melancholia, despair, and disappointment; registers of critique which found a large audience" (5).

The Amrohi clan ended up on two sides of the India-Pakistan border. Amrohi's cousins live in Karachi, where they have become leading editors of newspapers and poets; some were involved in the early Pakistani film industry. Even as the two countries were partitioned between Hindus and Muslims, India's Muslims also faced the question about their loyalty to the nation, and were forced to choose whether they would live in India or Pakistan. A contemporary of Kamal Amrohi, the revolutionary poet Josh Malihabadi who composed songs for Bombay films in the mid 1940s, wrote about the

ordeals of national citizenship. Josh's family moved to Pakistan after Partition, and he eventually became a Pakistani citizen in 1956 in order to join them and secure land allotment, after moving back and forth a few times. India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, a personal friend of Josh, urged him to stay in India. Josh, however, became a Pakistani citizen upon reflection on another friend's advice: "In Pakistan you will be treated as an Indian, whereas the Indians would be suspicious of you because your family members are citizens of Pakistan….Josh *Saheb*, you can't cross a river with your feet anchored in two boats…your credibility would be undermined in both countries" (202-203). Josh eventually came to regret his decision of moving to Pakistan, longing for his friends in Bombay, Hyderabad, Lucknow, and Delhi.

The decision to stay on in India or leave for Pakistan was, for many North Indian Muslims families, a painful one that separated people from their own families. As a result of this forced choice, many Muslim families became divided from one another, resulting in the permanent and agonizing reconfiguration of personal, political, and collective life. This is poignantly expressed in M.S. Sathyu's film, *Garam Hava* (*Warm Winds*) (1973), about the plight of the Mirzas, a Muslim family in post-Partition India; the film's protagonist (Balraj Sahni) deals with the dilemma of whether to move to Pakistan or stay in India, amidst anti-Muslim discrimination in India.

Unlike the fictional Mirzas, Amrohi's family was quite large. Kamal Amrohi's daughter, Rukhsar Amrohi today lives in Mumbai, but continues to travel to Karachi, where she visits the other half of her family. About Partition, she writes, "the relationship of both countries is like a sealed envelope" (Jamili). In presenting the contours of Amrohi's family history and authorship, I am suggesting that we not only subject the film text of *Mahal* to analysis, but also apprehend the ways Amrohi's films were informed by a complicated context—in this case, the dense networks of Urdu writers who themselves had become divided across national borders. Amrohi's film, *Mahal*, can be read for the specific contours of its internal narrative and aesthetics: how "Muslimness," urbanity and Urdu as a minoritized language, were intimately tied to popular narratives within a newly independent nation.

Kamal Amrohi sets the film in Allahabad, a city which itself had become a center for Hindi literary production during the 1940s and 50s. Meanwhile Bombay had become home to many Urdu-speaking Muslims who were involved in cinema, at a time when Muslim minoritization was imminent. The aesthetics of exile, despair, and urban decline associated with Urdu were integral to the formative period of conventional Bombay cinema, during the transitional period of Indian nation-building. This partially explains how much of the early language of cinema has been Urdu, for as Mukul Kesavan has argued, "Urdu didn't simply give utterance to the narrative characteristics of the Hindi cinema, it actually helped create them" (249). Bombay cinema, then, is a rich archive that explores the

intimate relationship between Urdu and the nation, revealing how a Muslim modernity found a 'home' in Bombay.

Tombs as Traces: Representing Indo-Muslim Monuments

The film *Mahal* horrifies through its seductive nostalgia for the "Islamicate" city, in an age when such nostalgia is pitched alongside enactments of modern national and communitarian violence against women. In Amrohi's film, the ghostly woman of the *mahal* (mansion) is depicted as enclosed by a tomb-like architecture: she is literally entombed. Kamini leads Shankar into the dark underground chambers of the mansion, where they appear to be meandering through the ruins of an ancient palace. The *mahal*, with its arches, high ceilings, and lattice-engraved walls, replicates the architecture of Indo-Muslim structures. According to the art historian Ebba Koch, the tomb has come to be seen as the single most important symbol of Indo-Muslim architecture. From saint's tombs, to the mausoleums of Mughal descendants and royal families, as Catherine Asher and Cynthia Talbot have noted, memorializing the dead was part of an artful and "syncretic" crafting of Indic and Islamicate architectural styles, such as the most iconic monuments of them all, the Taj Mahal.

The tomb in *Mahal* invokes symbols of Indo-Muslim power, which was in keeping with Kamal Amrohi's interest in making films with Mughal historical themes such as *Shah Jehan* (1942). If the popular mythologizing of the Taj Mahal—that of seventeenth-century Shah Jahan's enduring love for his wife—continues to circulate among tour-guides and in folklore alike, so too are the much darker legends of desire and violence of women being entombed in Indo-Muslim narratives. There is, for instance, the legend of Anarkali, supposedly the beloved dancing girl of the fourth Mughal emperor, Jahangir. *Anarkali* was published as a play in 1922 by Imtiaz Ali Taj and by the end of the narrative, she is walled alive in the palace, a punishment meted out to her by Emperor Akbar for falling in love with the heir-apparent.

This story has had a long after-life in post-Partition narratives. It was first made into a popular film by the same name, *Anarkali* (1953), directed by Nandlal Jaswantlal. The film ends with a scene in which the eponymous heroine sings while being walled alive and entombed, "do not call this abode of Anarkali a *mazar* (grave/mausoleum); call it a *mahal* (palace) of love." The story was then immortalized in K. Asif's epic film *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), for which Kamal Amrohi wrote the script. The film took fifteen years to make, affected by the loss of financiers and the upheaval of Partition. In this film, too, Anarkali is shown being walled alive before Akbar changes his mind, exiling her instead. In the mid 1960s, the writer Saghar Nizami re-published his version of the play, *Anarkali*, emphasizing the Mughal court trial that determined Anarkali's fate. Unlike the film, the plays by Taj and Nizami have long been forgotten. One rare copy contains a collection of writings by Urdu writers who ponder about whether or

not Anarkali was a real historical figure. In the introductory chapter entitled, "Who Was She?" Saghar Nizami argues that Anarkali was no legend, but an actual historical figure:

> There are those who say that Anarkali was poisoned. And there are others who say that Anarkali was stabbed. But, most traditions state she was walled alive. (*Anarkali* 7-8)

There is no evidence to suggest that Anarkali was a real historical figure. What is striking, however, is the preoccupation with Anarkali being walled alive in post-Partition cinema and literature. This trope exists in other contexts as well, such as in the Urdu feminist poetry of Kishwar Naheed.[2] The fictional Kamini of *Mahal* similarly evokes this trope of violence against women. Having died in the *mahal*, the depiction of Kamini's ghostly physicality is confined to the tomb-like building, hearkening back to ethereal, spectral traces of violated women of Partition.

The tomb as a trace left behind hints at the exodus of Muslims from Northern Indian cities during Partition. On the one hand, there was the widespread destruction of shrines and monuments during the violence, and on the other, the Indian State left many medieval era monuments to ruins. Anand Vivek Taneja, in his study of such sites, examines contemporary forms of memorialization around monuments in Delhi where people are engaged in cultural practices to which spirits (*jinn*) are central. Taneja ascribes the term "jinnealogy" to "a theological orientation that emerges when the geneaologies of human memory are confronted with the amnesic forces of an obliterated landscape" (139). In this sense, the film *Mahal*, can be said to belong to the cultural practice of 'jinneaology,' in which, as Taneja notes, "the supersession of human chains of memory by the long lives of jinn, challenges the magical amnesia of the state by bringing up other temporalities, political theologies, and modes of witnessing against the empty, homogenous time of a bureaucratically constituted present" (160).

Partition, Cinema, and Gendered Violence

Amnesia around Partition was not restricted to the state. For several decades, the gendered violence of Partition was not part of public discussion. There have also been silences within filmic discourse around the violence of Partition. As Bhaskar Sarkar has noted in examining three phases of Partition in cinema, Partition as a subject of Indian cinema only really took off after 1984, and unlike novels or short stories, film was not a medium for its sustained discussion. Only seven films openly discussed Partition at all in the first phase of cinema (1947-1962), and of those, only three took up the theme of abducted women, and their recovery; there were few films, mostly from within the art or parallel cinema movement that touched upon Partition during the second phase, in the 1970s and early 1980s. Only in the past two decades of the 1990s and 2000s has there been a

massive output of films from India that deal directly with Partition such as *Mammo* (1994), and in a self-consciously historical way *Earth* (1998), *Hey Ram* (1998), *Train to Pakistan* (1998), *Pinjar* (2000), *Refugee* (2000), *Gadar* (2001), *Khamosh Pani* (2003), *Veer Zaara* (2004), and *Partition* (2007). Almost all of these films at some point address the sexual violence of Partition. This output has also raised questions about pervasive ideologies of communalism and nationalism in relation to violence within these films and their portrayals of the minoritized 'Other' as Gita Viswanath, Salma Malik, and Shahnaz Khan have shown.

The surge of Partition cinema in recent decades, according to Bhaskar Sarkar, signals a "return of the collective repressed," a collective return to the original wound. Before the mid-1980s, Sarkar notes, the sorrow about Partition in public discourse only focused on the territorial divisions, and not the rapes and abductions. It was the "inability to mourn," Sarkar argues, "[that] produced a widespread feeling of despondence—a national condition of melancholy whose symptoms mark Indian cinema of the 1950s" (36). Sarkar asks, "what cultural mechanisms does mourning entail in a scenario of collective trauma?" and explores the "psycho-biography of the nation" by tracking Partition discourse across five decades of cinema. Sarkar then examines the very few films released during the first thirty years of independence that openly addressed Partition. Overall, studies of South Asian cinema have tended to disproportionately emphasize examining communalism within contemporary cinema. Films from the 1940s, for instance, a period that witnessed the sharpest communal violence, have been relatively overlooked. Those films, as Urvi Mukhopadhyay has noted, were filled with "representations of the 'controversial,' 'medieval' past…when communal politics was trying to define two prospective nation-states based on community identity" (63-64).

The film, *Mahal*, does not fit neatly into any category: it is neither a historical film, nor a social drama. Yet, as I illustrate in more detail below, the music and narrative of *Mahal* are deeply intertwined with Partition's losses. *Mahal*'s narrative stands out as representative, but also unique, for its time. As a ghost story, *Mahal* subverted the normative modes of Hindustani cinema. Unlike much of the Nehruvian-socialist inspired dramas of the 1950s, its resolution is not found in the pursuit of progress, for there is no moving forward when return of the dead is imminent. Nor does the tragedy of *Mahal* correspond to the many "social films" of the era, which often sought resolution with the halcyon union or re-union of the middle-class family order. As Wendy Hsu has argued, "besides the implicit, if not explicit, threat to the moral framework, the affective responses (fear and fascination) to a ghost film places it in a category of films that disturb the equilibrium of middle-class propriety and morality" (3). Unlike other Bombay productions of the period, "*Mahal* has no villain (at least on a conspicuous level), no impression of a strong familial tie (i.e. a lack of a motherly figure)" (3).

Most importantly, *Mahal* asks questions that are working through the traumatic underpinnings of their moment, and take on an ethical

hue: can one continue to love a woman who is dead? If not, then what are the means one must pursue in order to forget? What happens if one discovers that the dead is not really dead after all? Is it the pursuit of forgetting or the pursuit of remembering, that leads to madness and inexorable tragedy? Released at a time when the states of India and Pakistan had become vested in recovering abducted women from both sides of the newly created border in the name of national honor, the horrifying aspects of this film are played out in the representations of dead, dying, and deadened, women. It is a narrative attempting to come to terms with the crimes committed against girls and women during Partition, at a time when open public discussion and acknowledgement about such violence did not exist.

Moreover, the symbolism of the haunted house ought not be lost to anyone familiar with narratives of those other crimes of Partition: mass thefts of property. As millions migrated, people found themselves in homes that did not belong to them. Surely they must have found traces of the people who had left them behind. Tales of haunted homes are clues, in following up on the lost narratives of Partition's violent crossings. One example is from the autobiography of the Urdu writer Qudrat ullah Shahab (1926-1980), a prominent civil servant in Pakistan. In his magnum opus, *Shahabnama*, he devotes an entire chapter recounting his experience of living in a haunted house while working to rehabilitate refugees in East Pakistan. In those pages, apparitions of dead bodies appear from closets and walls, as do the cries of women.

What of the women "left behind," the ones who had been abducted, raped, forcibly converted, many living with their abductors' families? For government officials between the years of 1947 and 1949, it was seen as matter of national honor to return the abducted women to their original families. As Urvashi Butalia has argued, bringing in voices that exist beyond official state narratives is significant, particularly when turning to oral history as a way to foreground ordinary women's voices within historical narratives. She asks her readers to listen for those narratives on "the other side of silence," and consider women's agency during Partition, such as stories of women who refused to return to their families of origin, who resisted efforts of the state to "take them back," refusing to re-live the trauma of having to cross the border.

Mahal is not 'historical' in the conventional sense, for it does not refer specifically to a well-known historical event. For the historian, the question of literary and filmic genres sits awkwardly with the quest for retrieval of people's voices – that is, what a particular set of documents, cross-referenced and triangulated, might reveal about a place and a time and a collectivity. What reading practices and methodologies, might the historian practice, in considering *Mahal* as both a text, as well as a record of the collective experience of South Asia's Partition in relation to sexual violence? The questions that the film poses regarding dead and dying women are deeply ethical for their moment. Given the fact that Partition's survivors are passing

away, making oral histories difficult in the near future, such fragments within popular culture are important, suggestive sources.

Mahal, Mimesis, and the Gothic

Mahal was Bombay cinema's first "reincarnation thriller," inaugurating a popular sub-genre within Hindi cinema. Horror, however, was not a major preoccupation of Hindi cinema until the 1970s as Summer Pervez and Sean Moreland have pointed out. In *Mahal*, re-birth is associated with fear and violence, during the traumatic birth of two nation-states. The narrative of *Mahal* circles between memory, madness, and murder. It is a film in which women have most agentive capacity when they are dead. Kamini, the ghostly woman, persuades Shankar to murder the maidservant. By the end, a court trial takes place, a typical climax within Bombay cinema, in which conflicts are resolved by state intervention. During the trial, it is revealed that the maidservant Asha was masquerading as the spirit of Kamini. The excess is remarkable. The film continues for another twenty minutes following Kamini/Asha's lengthy testimony in court, explaining that her masquerade was both a hallucination and premeditated. Shankar, charged with murdering his wife, Ranjana (Vijaylaxmi) is scheduled to be executed, but is exonerated by new evidence. He returns to the mansion, but dies of grief upon witnessing Kamini's marriage to his friend—an alliance he himself arranged as his dying wish.

 Mahal employs the usual elements of Hindi films in the form of doppelgängers and mistaken identities. Nonetheless, the narrative is striking due to its theme of spirit possession, in which one woman pretends to be the ghost of another—a narrative that came on the heels of Partition's upheavals when women had been abducted, sexually violated, murdered (at times by their own family) or forcibly converted before being married to their abductors. By 1949 the states of India and Pakistan had developed policies aimed to recover and return the women to their original families.

 It was how this ghostly narrative borrowed from much older cultural idioms but within a new political context, that made the kinds of doubling that occur in *Mahal* terrifying. In the essay, "On Mimetic Faculty," Walter Benjamin argues that mimesis is historically dynamic; he mentions historical change in both "mimetic powers" and "mimetic objects" — in the ability to produce and to recognise similarities. He states that the "perceptual world of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies…familiar to ancient peoples," such as in occult practices (*Selected Writings* 721).

 Benjamin argues that the mimetic faculty is subject to "increasing fragility" in the modern world, given its dislodgment within other forms of language (spoken and written). I explore this fragility in film narrative by evaluating how pre-existing cultural idioms were re-worked for newer political contexts. *Mahal* initially seems incoherent,

but on closer inspection, the narrative plot is driven in sequential terms by seduction, abduction, and deception. First, there is the ghost's seduction of Shankar. Then there is an abduction sequence in which Shankar forces his wife Ranjana to journey with him into the wilderness, during which they cross "a river of fire." The final sequences of deception expose betrayals that take place within state institutions: Ranjana's death at the police station and Kamini's revelation in court.

Jyotika Virdi writes that, "Hindi cinema is unique in using the family as the primary trope to negotiate caste, class, community and gender divisions through which it configures the nation and constructs a nationalist imaginary" (7). Yet, *Mahal* contains no "national allegory," nor is there an over-arching "nationalist discourse" at work within the film. What makes *Mahal* a sub-text for Partition's losses is precisely that the family is not the point of departure for working out moral dilemmas; rather, home is a locus of death and madness. The film alludes to ethical struggles over remembering and forgetting the gendered violence of Partition.

Remembering and Forgetting Partition's Dead Women

Mahal depicts mourning, ghostly women amidst the turbulence of Partition, an event whose repercussions stretched out long after 1947. Let us turn to an early scene. As Shankar's friend attempts to convince him that he is hallucinating, Kamini's spirit appears suddenly, saying, "I am not an apparition, I am real!" She then jumps off the gazebo and vanishes into the waters below leaving no trace but a floating veil. The camera cuts to Shankar's expression of horror.

What makes the scene of the jump disturbing is its uncanny resemblance to the many references in newspaper accounts of women who had either jumped en masse into wells "voluntarily," or were forced to do so, to "protect their honor" — suicide being preferable to death by rape and abduction by men of the "other" community. Urvashi Butalia investigated one such incident, having heard from her informants stories of women jumping into wells, at times forced to jump into them by their own families, to avoid capture, rape, and forced conversion. Butalia writes,

> One informant reported watching more than ninety Sikh women jump into a well in her village in Rawalpindi on March 15th, 1947, when it was under attack from Muslims. The informant jumped in too with her children, but survived because the water was no longer deep enough for her to drown. When the well filled up, villagers dragged the women who were still alive out of the well. The incident was reported in the April 15th, 1947, edition of *The Statesman*, an English daily newspaper; the informant's brother-in-law had already killed his mother, sister, wife, daughter and uncle, and her daughter was also killed. ("Community, State, and Gender" WS-16)

This account, and others like it, raises questions for Butalia about women's agency during Partition. Women were both agents and victims, she notes, and their mass suicides were "violent acts, whose

ramifications, particularly in terms of their symbolic importance, are much wider and deeper than those of what one might rather cynically term the 'routine' violence of communal strife" for this was a "part of the violence…in which both men and women are involved and indeed part of the patriarchies that are embedded in these communities, which both men and women help to build and sustain" (WS-16).

The scene in *Mahal* that depicted an act of jumping into the water by a metaphorically dead woman, who insists that she is real, may have evoked a peculiar kind of horror in 1949. Within the film narrative, the character Shankar must regain his composure after witnessing the act. Kamini, even in death, is imprisoned by the physical structure of the home itself, longing to escape. Within the narrative plot, the figure of the ethereal, not quite dead woman, insists that she is 'real' in this act of evoking suicide.

Meanwhile Shankar's friend, Shivnath—the film's voice of reason—tells Shankar to leave the mansion at once. In spite of also 'seeing' Kamini jump off the gazebo, Shivnath turns away his gaze, then attempts to kill Kamini when she re-appears, only to shoot her reflection in the mirror. Shivnath warns Shankar that he must forget or else he will succumb to madness, and explains in a lexicon of scientific rationality: "At first, it will be painful to forget, but just as a surgeon applies an injection to the ill to make sure the surgical procedure can go on without problem, so too, must you forget." This is in opposition to Shankar, who, in pursuit of the mysterious woman, seeks the truth behind the manor's history. This constant tension between the ethics of forgetting and remembering structures the film.

Each time a clock chimes Shankar follows the ghostly singing into the mansion. Within *Mahal* lurks the terrifying links between historical event and madness—an opposition that threatens to bring to the surface a truth: that Partition violence was borne out of collective madness. There simultaneously exists a justification for the obsession: "Have I been brought to this mansion for a reason? To be with her? I am beginning to think that I am," says Shankar. At a time when men abducted women en masse, and people found themselves in homes that did not belong to them, perhaps married to their abductors, such an utterance bears a peculiar ethical burden.

In yet another scene, time and memory are symbolized by the chiming of the clock that pulls Shankar back towards the mansion, even as he has already boarded a train moving forward. This is an inversion of the telos of time as it is presented in official records, such as Jawaharlal Nehru's speech on August 15, 1947:

> Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance. ("Tryst with Destiny," Nehru)

The plot of *Mahal* (*The Mansion*), according to Meheli Sen, suggests that its "romance with the Gothic is an appropriation of an inherited colonial form" signaling that the Gothic found a particular home in

Bombay cinema, "jostling uneasily against the [reformist] imperatives of…the over-determined terrain of the Nehruvian Social [genre of the 1950s and 1960s], which sought to define and concretize postcolonial modernity at this time" (116). *Mahal* ran against the conventional, Nehruvian nationalist grain of commercial Hindi cinema but this is also because the narrative persists in a struggle between remembering versus forgetting violence. When the clock chimes in the film, it is not an awakening to freedom, but reinforcing one's link to the traces of the dead. Shankar is forced to confront the horrors of houses that belong to no one, but to women who jump off ledges.

Language of Abduction and Violence: Wilderness and Rivers

Eventually, Shankar is taken out of the mansion by his father, but only through threats of violence. Shankar agrees to marry his fiancée, Ranjana. On their wedding night, Shankar hears the clock chime, and cannot consummate his marriage. From this moment forward, the narrative is driven from Ranjana's point of view. In flashbacks, Ranjana's face appears as dark shroud, interposed on the letter she sends to her sister, as she delivers a monologue about how her husband is the cause of her pain:

> To this day I do not understand what kind of man my husband is — what I do know is that he is like a frightening dark night that casts long shadows over my life…Ever since he took me from my home, I have been enduring him.

Shortly after their marriage, in a bid to escape his memories of Kamini, Shankar decides to leave the city. Ranjana is forced by Shankar to accompany him into the wilderness, where she must live with him in a deserted hut, with terrifying and poisonous animals. Wild bats attack a screaming Ranjana, and the spectator watches her gaze in horror, as the camera cuts between her face that bears the marks of scratches and close-up shots of a snake and a hanging bat, beady eyes peering into the camera. It is difficult not to read this scene as anything but a metaphor for violent sexual attack: men who attacked women were described in Partition narratives as having transformed into "wild animals." Before reaching their hut they must traverse what Ranjana calls "a river of fire." Rivers often appear in both fictional as well as oral accounts of Partition. The rowing of boats and rivers appear in novels like Qurrulutain Hyder's *Ag Ka Darya* (*River of Fire*) (1953), and Advaita Malla Burman's *A River Called Titash*, which was made into a film by the same name, by the Bengali filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak in 1973. The trope of the river was often used to signify a world that was coming apart during Partition, and appears early on in the film *Mahal*: Shankar first sees the ghostly woman rowing her boat on the Yamuna.

Rivers have also been invoked in oral narratives of women who were asked about their experiences during Partition. Interviewing women survivors, Veena Das noticed that "[i]t was common to describe the violence of the Partition in such terms as rivers of blood

flowing and the earth covered with white shrouds right into the horizon." For Das, however, this ultimately reveals "a zone of silence" that functioned as a code between women who deemed it "dangerous to remember." Das writes that "the silence was achieved…by the use of language that was…metaphoric but evaded specific description of any events…leaving the actual experience of abduction and rape unstated" (84). In *Mahal*, the character Ranjana sees a "river of fire" and points to the *kafila* (convoy) of people carrying torches. They are "tribal peoples" — depicted in the film in extravagantly Orientalized fashion, described as people of a "different country" — and have gathered to determine the fate of an allegedly unfaithful woman. Ranjana is forced by her husband to watch the ritual in which the woman is killed. Soon after Ranjana is left alone in the hut, at the mercy of wild animals and then, contemplating suicide, she sings: "It is better to die than to go on living as though dead." This language is not a 'zone of silence' so much as the constitutive language of sexual violence that women underwent during Partition.

Affects of Seduction and Separation

Like many films of the 1940s and 1950s, *Mahal*'s musical score epitomized themes of separation, loss, and longing. As Kumkum Sangari has argued, songs of parting or separation within popular Hindi-Urdu cinema during these decades corresponded to the melancholia of the collective partings of Partition. Sangari calls for theorizing "affective complex" (separation, failed romance, transience) in terms of historical and economic transitions, and the making of nation-states through Partition. By exploring how the notion of *viraha* (separation), which had long existed within Indic poetic traditions, is re-shaped in early Indian film songs, Sangari argues that a specifically gendered configuration of abjection and agency was being produced within the social and cinematic modernity of the Nehruvian era. The theme song of *Mahal* is *Ayega Aanevala*, ("The one who must arrive, will arrive") and is played repeatedly to indicate that the male hero is possessed. The song includes references to an "interrupted youth," and an aching for hope to see one's beloved. Its evocative symbols of moths circling flames and lovers separated by river shores—common tropes of Bhakti and Sufi poetic traditions—shows how *viraha* or *judaii* (separation) can be "a sign of transience and a trigger for personal / collective memory [carrying] the pressure of *reminder* and *elision*" (281).

Film songs traditionally had a wider circulation than film narratives, through song booklets, magazines, and the radio. *Ayega Aanevala*, pitched in a romantic, nostalgic register, became extremely popular and was seen as responsible for the film's success. While there is insufficient material available about how the song was received on both sides of the newly created border, its popularity is related to the rise of the Indian mega-star playback singer, Lata Mangeshkar. In the 1940s, it was standard practice to name the character for which the

song was filmed, instead of the name of the singer. As Neeta Majumdar notes, "the enduring dominance of a mere handful of singers is also related to their shift to star status, which is indicated in the terminology referring to them: as "ghost voices" they were unacknowledged in credits, but as "playback singers" they developed star personas" (170). When *Aayega Aanewala* was played on All India Radio (AIR), the station was flooded with requests from listeners asking for the name of the actual singer and in an unprecedented move, AIR announced the name of the singer on air, making Lata Mangeshkar a household name (169-170). Mangeshkar's own rise to fame was linked also to the fact that many singers of Bombay cinema had left for Pakistan.

The collective desire to uncover the name of the ghostly singer of *Mahal* occurred while a state-led search was underway for abducted women who had gone missing during Partition. From 1948-1949, social workers were enlisted by the state to track and find missing women. For government officials in both India and Pakistan, it was seen as a matter of national honor to return the abducted women to their original families. As Ritu Menon and Kamila Bhasin have illustrated, this national honor was bound to a statist patriarchy whereby "both countries were engaged in a redefinition of each other's (and their own) national 'character,'" demonstrated by a commitment to upholding honor and restoring moral order (108). They conclude that for the state, "the proper regulation of women's sexuality had to be restored, and the sexual chaos that mass abduction represented had to be reversed. Thus, the individual and collective sins of men…had to be redeemed by nations who understood their duty in…bringing about sexual discipline and, through it, the desired reinforcement of community and national identities" (108).

It was in this context that *Ayega Aanevala* was heard on the radio, and on the film screen, sung by a mysterious, "ghostly" woman enduring hopelessness and seeking shelter, beckoning the male hero of the film into an obsessive madness. In *Mahal* the dead woman knows that her beloved's return is imminent, presumably to a place before her "youth had been interrupted." As the state longs to redeem men of the 'madness' of their crimes against women—as though the return of abducted women would somehow erase the memory of sexual violence itself—the song suggests otherwise. Kamini (the fictional character), and Lata Mangeshkar (the playback singer), fill in the void of collective desire: the missing women of Partition. Against the backdrop of state goals for recuperating lost women to erase the crimes, the song suggests that the forgetting of missing women is impossible, given the figure of an ethereal woman whose song haunts through cultural idioms of love, romance, and betrayal.

Narrating Partition Violence

Partition violence has been the subject of debate between historians of South Asia, especially since the 1990s. The violence of Partition has

put into question whether the discipline of history can adequately narrate 'the event.' There is a tremendous amount of scholarly writing about South Asia's independence from colonial rule and Partition in 1947.[3] In these histories and in works of political science, anthropology, comparative literature and post-colonial studies, it is impossible to begin writing about the largest human displacement in modern history without rendering the following: there exists a tension between 1) narrating the high politics of independence which involved the transfer of power from the British to South Asian elites of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League respectively, along with a plethora of 'failures' regarding power-sharing formulas, mis-steps, and factional allegiances—and 2) narrating the "unspeakable" and "in-articulatable" fratricidal atrocities on the ground, of murders, rapes, bodily mutilations, abductions, forced conversions, and thefts, committed between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs as millions were displaced.

The effects of Partition are visible even today, in attached row houses in cities such as Delhi, Lahore, Bombay, and Karachi, where refugee camps sprang up in the year 1947-48. As Vazira Zamindar has shown, Partition was not a single event in 1947, but stretched on for years afterwards, initiating an entire edifice of dispossession and displacement.[4] There has been very little that remains in order to construct a history of the peoples who underwent the painful transition to independence for there were no trials for the perpetrators of the violence, little data was collected, few eyewitness accounts were published at the time, houses were destroyed, and street names changed. Even many of the people who were left behind gave up their old identities for fear of more violence.

Over half a century has passed since Partition. An entire generation is passing away. Responding to the urgency of collecting oral narratives, citizen historians of the digital age have emerged. "Shockingly, there exists no memorial or public archive devoted to Partition and to the memories of those whose lives were affected. There exists no source of witness voices for us to learn from. So we decided to create one," explains the introductory video on the web site of the 1947 Partition Archive.[5] This campaign builds on interventions by feminist activists and scholars of the past two decades.

Meanwhile, there is a consensus among scholars who have studied Partition that the pain and trauma people experienced is best rendered through fictionalized accounts.[6] The notion that historical narratives with an emphasis on high politics and statistics have been unable to do justice to the traumas people underwent has led to a heavy focus on fictional literature as a ready repository for writing a people's history of Partition. Yet, literary accounts were accessible to the literate, a relatively small portion of the overall South Asian population. As David Gilmartin has remarked, "fiction has, ironically, proved a far more powerful vehicle for describing the influence of partition on the common man and woman than for describing the influence of the common people on partition" (1069). I suggest that delving into popular culture, accessible to a far greater number of

people, rather than focusing singularly on literary accounts of Partition, may open up a space for critical reflection over such "influences," in relation to the destruction of shared social and cultural spaces that were once capable of accommodating religious difference.

Attempts to retrieve historical subjects entails an inquiry of critically reading texts not typically included within an official archive. My reading of the film, *Mahal*, simultaneously emphasizes internal narrative structures, reading the politics of fear within the text, while also situating it within the historical conditions of its making. The archive of Indian independence, decolonization, and Partition was left wounded because official records, books, papers, and documents were divided across the new states. This archive is also wounded by the lack of testimony following the atrocities. What historians are left with are fragmentary and anecdotal references to the emotions circulating in the aftermath of Partition. Rather than casting them away as silence, they might perhaps be better understood as ethical struggles over forgetting and remembering the violence itself.

Notes

1. For more information on the subject of women, silence, and the gendered violence of Partition, see Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence* (Duke UP, 2000); Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (U of California P, 2007); Sukeshi Kamra, *Bearing Witness: Partition, Independence, End of the Raj* (U of Calgary P, 2002); and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (Rutgers UP, 1998).

2. See Kishwar Naheed's poem, "I am not that woman / Selling you socks and shoes! Remember me, I am the one you hid / In your walls of stone, while you roamed / Free as the breeze, not knowing / That my voice cannot be smothered by stones."

3. Gyan Pandey's *Remembering Partition*, Yasmin Khan's *The Great Partition*, Vazira Zamindar's *The Long Partition*, Ayesha Jalal's *The Pity of Partition*, Mushirul Hasan's *India Partitioned*.

4. Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (Columbia UP, 2007).

5. n.p. "Witness Voice: Untold Stories of South Asia's Partition." The 1947 Partition Archive. n.d. Web. 18 Feb. 2015.

6. See Daisy Rockwell, "The Peculiarities of Partition Literature," in Chapati Mystery, February 10, 2010, www.chapatimystery.com/archives/univercity/particularities_of_partiti on_literature_i.html. Rockwell argues that the turn to fiction as the resource for historical analysis has given rise to a veritable genre of 'Partition literature.' Such categorization, Rockwell suggests, tends to

lump together a diverse set of authors who may have touched upon Partition in their literary works, but for whom Partition was not the only, nor even the main, concern. The works of Sa'adat Hasan Manto are memorialized as "Partition literature," but doing so is reductive, for it hollows out this intellectual's diverse writings and assigns Partition-related fiction as its own "genre."

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