

Train and Tanga as a Cinematic Metaphor: Visualizing Migration, Trauma and Religious Identity in M. S. Sathyu's *Garam Hawa*

Md Danish Rahman^{1*}, Ritu S. Sood², Mohammad Ashraf Ali³

¹Research Scholar, Sharda School of Media, Film and Entertainment, Sharda University, Greater Noida, India

²Professor, Sharda School of Media, Film and Entertainment, Sharda University, Greater Noida, India

³Assistant Professor, Sharda School of Media, Film and Entertainment, Sharda University, Greater Noida, India

ARTICLE INFO

*Correspondence:

md.danish09@gmail.com

Research Scholar, Sharda School of Media, Film and Entertainment, Sharda University, Greater Noida, India

Dates:

Received: 15-08-2025

Accepted: 20-10-2025

Published: 31-12-2025

Keywords:

Train, Tanga,
Partition Cinema,
Forced Migration,
Displacement, Garam
Hawa

How to Cite:

Rahman, D., Sood, R.S., Ali, M.A. (2025) Train and Tanga as a Cinematic Metaphor: Visualizing Migration, Trauma and Religious Identity in M. S. Sathyu's *Garam Hawa*. *MediaSpace: DME Journal of Communication*, 6(2), 17-24.

doi: 10.53361/dmejc.v6i02.03

Abstract

The Partition of India on the basis of religion in 1947 was one of the most tragic events in the history of Indian subcontinent. It brought uncertainty and changed the life of millions forever. People were forced to migrate concerning their safety and security. They left their belongings thinking they may comeback once the situation gets normal but never to return. The rumors and riots fueled by religious hatred intensified the displacement, and millions lost their life in those arduous and risky journeys. The only means of travel for common people were train, tanga and bullock cart. Even those means of transport were not affordable or available for many and people tried to cross the border on foot covering hundreds of kilometers. The train and tanga, full of humans and their belongings became the biggest symbol of displacement and homelessness in those times. The film *Garam Hawa* (1974) by M.S. Sathyu showcases the plight and agony of Muslims in India after the partition were announced. The use of train and tanga as a cinematic metaphor to present the deep feelings of helplessness, isolation and insecurity that Muslims had to face is clearly evident in the film. The trains and tanga in the film symbolize the separation of families, their ordeal and the rootlessness from their homeland.

This study examines the train and tanga as a visual sign that highlights the collective suffering and social instability of the time. Train and tanga scenes do not only depict physical journeys but also reveal mental and emotional journeys, involving memories, fears and hopes. This study also explains how *Garam Hawa* sensitively communicates the tragedy of Partition to the general audience through the image of the train and tanga. This research is useful for film and media studies because it shows that a visual symbol can be able to explain complex historical experiences at a simple and deeply emotional level.

INTRODUCTION

The partition of India took place in the year 1947 and it cannot be called just a political event. It was a period that shook the lives of crores of people deeply. The suddenly drawn borders broke the identities, relationships and secure lives of the people. On one hand there was the joy of independence and on

MediaSpace:

DME Journal of Communication

e-ISSN: 2583-035X

the other hand there was the pain of displacement, fear and countless separations. Millions of people were uprooted from their roots and had to leave their homes and go to new places (Talbot, 2009). This historical event left an indelible mark on Indian society and this memory is still alive in literature, art and cinema.

Trains and tangas emerged as the most talked about and fearful image at the time of partition. Trains and tangas were not just a means of travel but they became a symbol of displacement, fear and death. Countless families left their homes and headed for an uncertain future in these trains and tangas. Many times, these trains and tangas also became witnesses of violence and genocide (N. Singh, 2012). That is why the image of the train and tanga in the context of Partition tells the story not only of iron coaches and open cart pulled by horses or bullocks but also of broken dreams and shattered lives.

Against this background, the film *Garam Hawa* released in the year 1974 has special significance. Inspired by the tradition of writers like Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai, this film brings the tragedy of Partition to the screen. It shows the story of a Muslim family which is settled in Agra but suddenly starts being looked at with suspicious eyes after Partition. The family members want to stay in the country but circumstances keep pushing them to the margins. The train and tangas emerges as an important symbol in this entire story (Mukherjee, 2023).

In the film, the train and tangas are shown not just as a means of transport but as a metaphor. This metaphor shows helplessness, separation, uncertainty and insecurity. When a family member travels to Pakistan by train or leaves their house, keeping their belongings on tanga, it becomes not just a journey but a symbol of being cut off from one's roots (P. R. Singh, 2024). The train and tanga here brings forth the social instability and collective suffering of that period.

It is also important to understand why this metaphor of the train and tanga is important. History tells us events in the form of facts but art and cinema bring those events alive at the level of emotions (Schwartz, 2006). *Garam Hawa* conveys the pain of Partition to the general viewer in a very

simple and sensitive way through the image of the train, tanga and displacement. This film shows how trains and tangas cut off relationships and make a person a stranger in his own country.

The aim of this research is to do an in-depth study of the metaphor of the train and tanga in the film *Garam Hawa*. Specifically, to see how the train and tanga becomes a symbol of forced migration and displacement. Along with this, this study will also try to understand how the train and tanga scenes create an emotional connection in the audience and make them feel the pain of Partition deeply.

The main objectives of the research are as follows

- To find out how the train and tanga has been used as a symbol of helplessness and migration in the film.
- To understand how the film highlights collective suffering and social instability through the train and tanga.
- To know how the image of the train and tanga brings forth the post-Partition Muslim experience and identity crisis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature and cinema on the Partition of India have always played an important role in keeping this painful chapter of history alive. Many writers and filmmakers have presented the tragedy of that time from different perspectives. Partition has been seen not only as a political event but also as a social and cultural trauma.

Previous Studies on Partition and Cinema

Partition literature put pain and displacement into words while cinema presented those feelings to the audience in visual form (Bernard, 2010). Filmmakers like Ritwik Ghatak depicted the social consequences of Partition in their films. Ghatak's films *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Komal Gandhar* centered on displacement and identity crisis (Barman, 2022). On the other hand, directors like Govind Nihalani and Shyam Benegal also brought collective pain to the screen in their times.

In Hindi cinema, *Train to Pakistan* (1998) based on Khushwant Singh's novel presented the horrors of Partition directly. Both the novel and the film show how trains became a vehicle of life and death during that period. Similarly, Govind Nihlani's *Tamas* also depicted the violence of Partition and the sense of insecurity it created.

Symbolic use of train and tanga in literature and films

The train and tanga has been seen as the most prominent image of Partition. In Manto's stories, trains appear as witnesses to the violence and fear of that time. Those stories not only narrate reality but also show how trains were breaking the social fabric (Rumi, 2012). In literature, the train and tanga has been repeatedly used as a symbol of displacement and uprooting.

A similar trend is seen in cinema as well. In the images of *Train to Pakistan*, trains are shown filled with dead bodies, which directly confronts the viewer with the horrors of that period. Similarly, in *Garam Hawa*, tanga has repeatedly used as means of showcasing the trauma of displacement. In the context of Partition, the train and tanga becomes not just a means of travel but a symbol of the journey of both the living and the dead. The sound of the train and its stopping or moving creates an emotional shock for the viewer.

Scholarly Opinion on Displacement and Visual Metaphors

Many scholars have explained the displacement caused by Partition not only as a geographical change but also as a mental and cultural trauma. Displacement does not only mean changing homes but also losing one's identity, culture and social status. Visual metaphors play a special role in explaining this experience.

In film studies, it has been believed that symbols and metaphors make difficult experiences easily accessible to the audience (Whittock, 1990). A complex and painful subject like Partition may seem heavy and harsh when shown directly as facts. But when the same experiences are shown through metaphors such as train, house, river or road, the audience connects with them emotionally. The

train has repeatedly been considered a carrier of collective suffering that is beyond words.

Gains in existing research

Although there are many writings and films on Partition and the image of the train and tanga, there has been very little in-depth study of this symbol in the context of *Garam Hawa*. In this film, the train and tanga is shown not only as a symbol of violence or death but also as an image of insecurity, identity crisis and helplessness. While other studies have associated the train only with the brutality of Partition, *Garam Hawa* presents it as a metaphor for social and familial breakdown.

This is why it becomes important to understand the use of the train and tanga in this film separately. Research so far has highlighted Partition and displacement in general but not enough attention has been paid to how the image of the train affects the sensibilities of the audience in this particular film.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted qualitative and interpretive research methodology. Since the film *Garam Hawa* shows the social and emotional effects of Partition in depth, quantitative data cannot explain the complexity of this subject. For this reason, visual analysis and interpretation of metaphors have been made the main basis. The purpose is to read the scenes of the film not only as a narrative but also as symbols and signs.

Scene-by-scene analysis

The research has analyzed the film sequentially. Every scene was carefully observed and the signs and emotions present in it were separated. Especially the scenes related to the train and tanga were marked separately because they represent displacement, and helplessness. In this process, those moments were also recorded where the train and tanga comes directly on the screen and also those moments where the sound or symbolic presence of the train and tanga is felt.

Coding Process

A coding chart was prepared to understand the scenes of the film. This chart has three main categories

Table 1: Scene Analysis Matrix

S. No	Scene/Context	What Happens in the Scene	Symbolic Meaning	Research Category (Code)	Impact on Viewer
1	First train scene	Family member departs from the station	Separation	Migration and Trauma	Viewer realizes that return is no longer possible
2	Salim Mirza travels in Tanga	After signing off his relative on railway station, Salim Mirza boards tanga and talks with driver about one after other relatives migrating to Pakistan	Separation	Trauma	Scene creates a sense of helplessness about the condition of Muslims in post-partition India
3	Tanga driver asks extra money from Salim Mirza	Salim Mirza and his staff Pyarelal sit in tanga where the tanga driver ask them more money and say "the situation is not in your favor (Muslim), if you want to board tanga, you will have to pay more or go to Pakistan"	Attack on religious identity, interfaith trust strained or broken	Religious Identity	Viewer realizes that the relation is not cordial between Hindus and Muslims
4	Salim Mirza migrates to rented house with his belongings on tanga	Salim Mirza with his entire family members leaves his ancestral house and moves to rented house. They hire tanga for taking their belongings to new location.	Invisible pain, nostalgia, mental stress and memories	Migration and Trauma	Viewer feels a deep sense of uneasiness
5	Bakar Mia going to Pakistan in train and Salim Mirza returns from railways station in tanga	After seeing off Bakar Miya on railway station, Salim Mia sits in tanga. The tangawala asks him who he had left today and says he is very courageous as he leaves every family member one by one and not going himself to Pakistan	Crisis of identity and loyalty	Migration	The question arises whether leaving the country is personal or a compulsion
6	Salim Mirza travels in tanga and the tanga hits someone accidentally	The tanga in which Salim Mirza was travelling hits a person and the situation becomes out of control. Stone pelting and arson starts. Salim Mirza is wounded and his factory is set on fire.	Attack on religious identity, interfaith trust broken	Trauma and religious identity	Viewer feels the fear in the eyes of Salim Mirza
7	Salim Mirza with his family travels in tanga to board train to migrate to Pakistan	Salim Mirza along with his family sits in tanga and leaves for railway station. But in the midway, they saw the protest going on for job. Sikandar asks permission from Salim Mirza to join the protest. As he joins Salim Mirza too changes his thought to migrate and joins the crowd. He asks his wife to go back to house.	Nostalgia, rootlessness	Migration	Viewer feels the nostalgia and rootlessness

This table clearly lays out every major moment related to the train and tanga in the film *Garam Hawa*. It explains what is happening in the scene, what is its symbolic meaning, which research category (e.g. trauma, migration, or religious identity) it falls under and what impact it has on the viewer.

- First category is related to *trauma* which includes scenes that show the pain of family separation and social isolation.
- Second category is related to *migration* which includes moments when people are forced to leave their homes.
- Third category is *religious identity* to understand how belonging to a particular religion affects a person's social status and insecurity.

This coding makes it clear that the metaphor of the train and tanga opens up multiple meanings at the same time.

Theoretical Foundation

The researcher has adopted two major theoretical approaches in order to better understand the topic of study.

Visual Semiotics Theory

The theory provides that the signs and symbols present in each scene have a deep interpretation in themselves (Dunleavy, 2020). For example, the moving train in Garam Hawa is not just a train leaving the station but also a sign of migration, separation and homelessness.

Post-colonial Theory

This approach helps us understand how Muslim identity was tested after Partition and how the definition of nationhood changed. In the film Garam Hawa, M.S. Sathyu not only brings to life this identity crisis through train and tanga but also represent the mental distance and distrust among communities.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research methodology employed in this paper aims to study *Garam Hawa* both as a historical and cultural document rather than just as a visual form of the partition story. It tries to examine how the train and tanga has been used as visual metaphor in the film to narrate the experience of those affected by the traumatic event of partition.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The train and tanga in *Garam Hawa* is not only

the means of transportation for people like Salim Mirza, but it emerges as one of the most effective metaphors to express the ground condition including the mental and social situation of that time. Showing the complex situation of partition experience on screen in a simple straightforward factual form was extremely difficult. M.S. Sathyu used the train and tanga as symbol of displacement in the film resulting deep connection with the audience. The sound of train engine, the visual of people leaving their home with all their belongings in tanga, every scene, every symbol of train and tanga depicts the plight of those migrating. It highlights the uncertainty, displacement, identity crisis and collective suffering. This table clearly lays out every major moment related to the train and tanga in the film Garam Hawa. It explains what is happening in the scene, what is its symbolic meaning, which research category (e.g. trauma, migration, or religious identity) it falls under and what impact it has on the viewer

Metaphor of the train: uncertainty and feeling of being lost

Every time Salim Mirza goes to railway station, one or other his relative leaves India. He helplessly watches his relatives leaving their motherland one after another due to uncertainty and gloomy future. In such situation, train obviously turns out to be rescuer taking them to new destination witnessing the challenges they face during such journeys. The

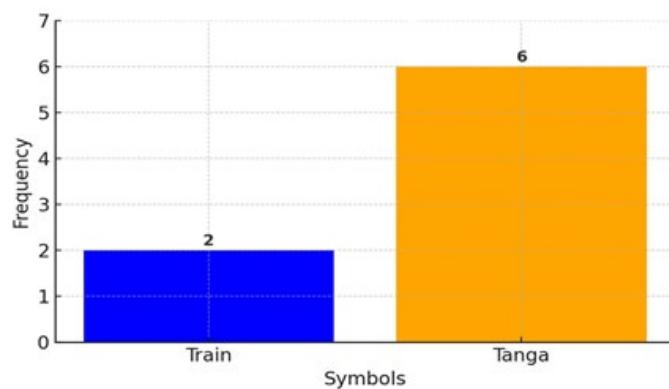


Fig-1: Bar graph showing Frequency of Train and Tanga-Related Symbols in *Garam Hawa*

scene of train moving from station has been shown with a deep symbol in the film. The moving train on tracks symbolizes the uncertain journey of life after partition, where no one is certain of their future. Those travelling never wanted this, still they had to face such circumstances. Millions boarded the train without clear idea of where exactly they are moving, whether they would be accepted there, whether they would find new shelter there to call them home or they will reduce to be stranger in new place.

The train here symbolizes both hope and despair. On one hand it provides hope of a safer new future and on the other hand it symbolizes leaving behind the home and identity with lifetime pain and trauma of moving away in such manner. When the audience watches train gaining speed, passengers waving hands to their left ones at station, may be never to see them again, they feel that these moving trains are not just iron coaches but are moving hope carrying broken dreams and last memories.

The train in *Garam Hawa* brings out the collective challenges and tragedy, an entire community had to face. The shots of moving train, restlessness at the station, and the train gutted with passengers show that the migration and displacement of residents at both side of the border was not a single event or an experience of an individual but a collective experience. Train in the film is like "moving settlement", taking people towards an unknown future. The viewers clearly understands that this is not just about Salim Mirza family but is a shared experience of millions of people.

Railway Station: A place between belongingness and exile

The film, *Garam Hawa* not only depicts the railway station as a physical place but as a *liminal space*. The railway station emerges as a place where people get a sense of hope of better future with a sense of anxiety, what if they get attacked during the journey, what if the train is looted somewhere, what if women with them have to face physical abuse. It becomes a place where relationships break and where someone's future is decided. Railway station in the film is the border between belongingness and exile.

The scene where Salim Mirza farewells his relatives

make the audience experience that this place is not just a place of journey but an area of where people make decision of their existence. Station here means getting stuck between two world- at one end, it is past and home, and on the other unknown future and may be life-long alienation.

Tanga: Journey of hope and fear

Interestingly, the tanga in the film is not just an image of hope but it also brings a sense of uncertainty in viewer's mind. The tanga shows that people are embarking on a new journey, even if under compulsion. Maybe in the future they will get stability and a new home.

This conflict makes the tanga the most powerful metaphor. At the same time, it is a symbol of both hope and despair. The viewer, while watching the tanga, feels as if life itself is a journey in which sometimes there is happiness, sometimes pain, and sometimes just uncertainty.

This pie chart shows which themes have been given the most importance in the train and trauma scenes in the film *Garam Hawa*. It has three main categories – Trauma, Migration, and Religious Identity. The chart clearly shows that trauma and migration have the largest share. This means that most of the train and tanga scenes directly depict separation, mental anguish, and displacement. The share of religious identity is slightly less, but it is also important because the train and tanga repeatedly raises the question of who can live in his country and who cannot. By looking at this chart, the reader can easily understand that the image of the train and tanga reflects the most emotional and social breakdown.

DISCUSSION

Metaphor of train in *Garam Hawa* and other Partition stories

The train has always been an important symbol in stories and films made on the partition of India. In works like *Train to Pakistan*, the train is directly shown as a vehicle of life and death. There, dead bodies, blood and violence are seen in the train compartments. The main purpose of this story has been to immediately confront the viewer with the horror of that time. But in *Garam Hawa*, the director

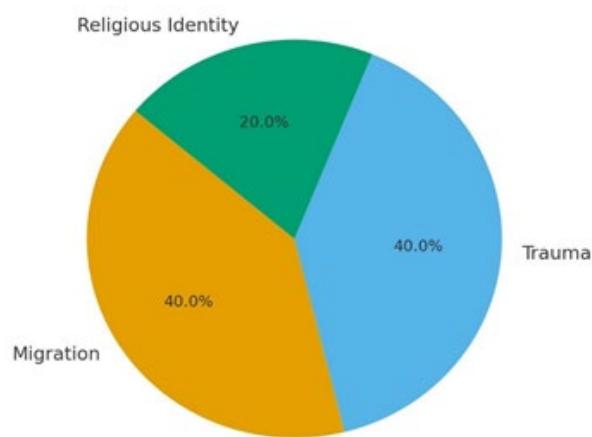


Fig-2: Pie Chart of Distribution of Themes in Train and Tanga-Related Scenes in Garam Hawa

has presented the train from a different perspective. Here the train does not become a blood-soaked image but a force that silently cuts people off from their homes and roots. This difference is what distinguishes *Garam Hawa* from other Partition stories.

Emotional exile beyond physical displacement

In *Garam Hawa*, the train is not just a means of transporting the body from one place to another. It is also a symbol of emotional exile. When a character catches the train, he goes away not only from his home but also from his relationships, memories and identity. Every scene on the train deepens the feeling that a person can become a stranger even while living in the country. This feeling forces the viewer to think that displacement is not only geographical but affects the heart and mind deeply.

Migration and the role of the train and tanga

The film also shows that the train and tanga is not only a symbol of personal suffering, but it also represents the mass displacement of common people post-partition. When a member of a Muslim family travels to Pakistan by train, the question arises whether he left the country or the circumstances forced him to do so. Here, the train and tanga journey becomes not just about covering a distance

but also about the ordeal and personal loss a family had to face.

Religious identity and separation from roots

The image of the train and tanga in *Garam Hawa* is also deeply connected to religious identity. At the time of partition, the Muslim community was looked at with the most suspicion. The film repeatedly shows how people started feeling like strangers in their own city and neighborhood. The train and tanga here are a reminder of the compulsions when a person is separated from his home to save his identity. This image brings forth the pain of being cut off from his roots which is not easy to put into words.

Symbol of collective suffering

The train and tanga becomes a symbol of not just the story of one family but the tragedy of an entire community. The scenes of the train, the station and the tanga show that this pain was equally spread in every home and every community. The train in *Garam Hawa* is special because it presents in depth the mental and social breakdown of the living people.

CONCLUSION

In the film *Garam Hawa*, the train and tanga is not just a simple means of transport but it carries a deep symbolism. This symbol becomes the most effective way to convey the painful and complex experience of Partition to the audience through the film. The train is not just the sound of iron trains and tracks but it bears witness to broken relationships, broken dreams and uncertain future. It sometimes gives a ray of hope and sometimes becomes a symbol of permanent separation, suffering and pain. The uniqueness of *Garam Hawa* is that train and tanga is not just associated with blood and violence but it has also been made a symbol of emotional exile and social isolation. Audience feels the whole situation in which families are breaking up, identity is being questioned and people are becoming strangers in their own cities and neighborhoods.

The research paper highlights the importance of visual symbol and showcases that a visual symbol on screen can represent the complexities of history

and society in a simple and easy way. For instance, the symbol of train and tanga makes it clear that migration is not only physical displacement but also mental and cultural relocation. When a character travel in a train, he does not just cover a distance but also experiences being cut off from his relationships, his identity and his roots. From this perspective, *Garam Hawa* is successful in showing that the pain of Partition can be understood not only through figures and facts but also through emotions and symbols.

The study adds a new perspective to cinema and literature related to Partition. So far most of the research has seen the train only as a vehicle carrying violence and death, but here it is shown that the train is also a symbol that opens up meaning at many levels such as displacement, insecurity, nationalism and religious identity. It shows that visual symbols can also convey to the audience those experiences that are difficult to express in words.

Another important outcome is that this research helps to understand the power of visual narrative. Reading history only as a list of facts and events does not fully reach the minds of the audience, but when the same history is presented in a symbolic form in a film, such as through a train or tanga, it touches the sensibilities and survives for generations. This is why the memories of Partition are still alive in people's minds through stories, novels and films.

This symbol of the train and tanga is not limited to the context of Partition. It also gives us an opportunity to understand global issues such as migration, displacement and identity crisis. When we go to another society or country, it is not just a journey but also an experience of distance from our

past. From this point of view, the study of *Garam Hawa* forces us to think about how symbolic images such as trains and tanga in every society can express the pain of displacement and being cut off from roots.

It can be said that in *Garam Hawa*, the train and tanga becomes the most powerful visual language of the pain of Partition. This symbol not only helps in understanding the social and political crisis of the time but also makes the audience realize that visual stories and symbols can keep history alive.

REFERENCES

Barman, B. (2022). MEGHE DHAKA TARA: A MICRO HISTORY OF POST-PARTITION BENGAL THROUGH THE STRUGGLE OF A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY. *Utkal Historical Research Journal*, XXXV.

Bernard, A. (2010). Forms of memory: Partition as a literary paradigm. *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 30.

Dunleavy, D. (2020). Visual semiotics theory: Introduction to the science of signs. In *Handbook of visual communication* (pp. 155–170). Routledge.

Mukherjee, A. (2023). Scorching Wind: Historicity and Post-Partition Crisis of Muslim Existence in M.S Sathyu's *Garm Hawa*. *Meher Journal of English Studies*, 5(1), 83.

Rumi, R. (2012). Reclaiming Humanity: Women in Manto's Short Stories. *Social Scientist*, 40(11/12), 75–86.

Schwartz, L.-G. (2006). Cinema and the Meaning of "Life". *Discourse*, 28(2), 7–27.

Singh, N. (2012). A STUDY ON KHUSHWANT SINGH'S TRAIN TO PAKISTAN.

Singh, P. R. (2024). Chronotopic Consonance in *Garm Hawa* (1974) and *Mammo* (1994). *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 12, 90–94.

Talbot, I. (2009). Partition of India: the human dimension: introduction. *Cultural and Social History*, 6(4), 403–410.

Whittock, T. (1990). *Metaphor and film*. Cambridge University Press.