

Divided Homelands, Fragmented Lives: Partition Narratives in Hindi Parallel Cinema

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Abstract

The year 1947 was a defining moment in history for South Asia when India became independent from the British Raj. The Partition of India and the subsequent violence and mass migration created an unending trauma, memory and identity issues. This paper explores how Hindi parallel cinema represents the Partition of India through a close analysis of two specific films, Garam Hawa and Tamas. The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to examine how cinematic texts in these films mediate experiences of violence, displacement and belonging. The study reveals that Partition trauma is articulated not only through the narrative content but also through the aesthetic strategies such as fragmentation, silence, spatial dislocation and narrative ellipsis. Both films present an alternate form of history, as Garam Hawa presents a personal and intimate representation of the aftermath of Partition while Tamas presents a broad multi-narrative perspective on the communal violence and breakdown of society that resulted from Partition. The study highlights the relationship between formal structure and historical experience, as well as contributing new insights to the fields of film studies and trauma theory through an analysis of culturally relevant accounts of the Partition using realist cinematic practices to convey historical trauma.

INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 is one of the important moments in the history of Indian subcontinent that had a traumatic effect on South Asian modernity. The event caused many people to lose their homes as a result of communal violence and redefined how nations and people identify themselves. As the Partition of India does not follow a linear trajectory in terms of history, it remains a site of trauma and unresolved memory with varying opinions and perspectives (Rahman et al., 2025). The afterlives of events are often expressed in representational forms that surpass the boundaries of archival history. Cinema is particularly an important medium for inscription and dissemination of this effect (Hirsch, 2008; Landsberg, 2004).

The narrative of Partition in Indian screen cultures has been shaped by the ideological and aesthetic differences between mainstream cinema and the

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parallel film movement. Mainstream cinema has often tried to hide the Partition under melodramatic and nationalist themes, while the Hindi parallel cinema and other forms of realistic cinema have tried to break down these narrative closures by focusing on social realism, ambiguity and political critique. This method shifts the viewer's focus from spectacle to self-reflection, emphasizing the experiential aspects of violence, loss and displacement (Rajadhyaksha & Willemsen, 2014; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998).

This article examines how Partition is represented in Hindi parallel cinema by analysing *Garam Hawa* (1974) and *Tamas* (1988). *Garam Hawa* illustrates the gradual disintegration of a Muslim family's sense of belonging after Partition in Post-Partition India. However, *Tamas* shows the escalation of sectarian violence preceded by increasing tensions within an already fractured society before Partition. Therefore, when these two films are viewed in conjunction, they create a dialectical relationship between scale and history from a personal-to-group perspective both in terms of historically-present experiences.

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in trauma theory, specifically the contributions of Cathy Caruth, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth who defines trauma as an event that cannot be fully processed at the time it occurs but that returns in fragmented and repetitive ways (Caruth, 1996). This framework highlights the limits of representation, proposing that trauma is as much constituted through absence, silence, and disjunction of time as through explicit representation. This applies to cinema, and raises essential questions about the relationship between aesthetic form and historical violence.

There have been a number of studies on Partition and its cultural effects, but little research has been done on the formal and aesthetic aspects of its cinematic representation. Contemporary research has been largely focused on thematic analyses on violence, migration and nationalism, with little attention to the mediating role of film language in promoting emotional and ethical engagement

with the past (Kabir, 2013; Pandey, 2001). This article addresses this gap by examining the relationship between form and trauma. It analyses how certain aesthetic techniques, such as silence, episodic fragmentation, spatial dislocation, and visual symbolism, make up a cinematic grammar of Partition.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative, interpretive framework that is based on close textual analysis, paying attention to both narrative structures and formal features. This article contends that *Garam Hawa* and *Tamas*, through their realist aesthetics and defiance of narrative closure, serve as critical counter-archives that disrupt prevailing historiographies of Partition.

Literature Review

Partition, Memory, and Cultural Narratives

Scholars have extensively looked into and debated around the Partition of India representing a large temporal rupture. The earlier historians have viewed the partition as an event of the nation state, and in terms of theories of nationalism, while the later historians have begun producing a more fragmented, subjective, and emotional representation of memory. Khan (2017) writes that there are major differences in individual experiences of Partition. He argues that it should be viewed not as a single historical event, but as a series of highly localized Partition narratives. Jalal (2014) also locates the Partition within broader regional and international political discourses, making it difficult to view it simply in terms of blame and victimhood.

Memory studies contribute to this discourse by explaining that remembering is a mediated process. Cultural memory can be viewed as a process shaped through symbolic forms and media (Assmann, 2011). This means that the representation of partition is actively constructed, not passively inherited. The South Asian context underscores the importance of the role of narrative in the articulation of trauma. These conceptualisations further suggest that cinematic texts need to be studied not just as

historical representations but as active sites for the production of memory (Bhalla, 1994).

Trauma Theory and Cinema

Trauma Theory offers a critical approach to the representation of violence and disruption in cultural texts. A key notion in this framework is that trauma disrupts conventional narrative forms by generating absences, silences and temporal dislocations (Felman & Laub, 1992). In this context, Felman & Laub (1992) argues that trauma and testimony possess a reciprocal relationship, wherein the act of narrating trauma is simultaneously essential and inadequate for conveying one's violent traumatic experience.

In film studies, Trauma Theory can be used to look at how filmmakers make films that push the boundaries of representation. As Elsaesser (2013) suggests, filmmakers can use the formal elements of their films, fragmentation, repetition and visual dislocation, to express trauma. In a similar way, Kaplan (2005) explores the mediation of trauma by visual culture through the lens of spectatorship.

Each of these methodologies is especially relevant to the study of Partition narratives, as the notion of trauma is represented in both the absence of representation and the presence of ruptures in narration. Thus, it is necessary to take into consideration the methods of aesthetic expression when analysing the film, since it explains how trauma invades the whole structure of cinema.

Hindi Parallel Cinema and Realism

With India's independence, the emergence of Hindi parallel cinema provided an alternate filmmaking outlet to popular Hindi films. These films, often referred to as parallel cinema, were developed as a result of the need for an artistic form in India that would provide social commentary based on reality. In addition, parallel cinema utilized a number of formal innovations and has been influenced by world film movements such as Italian Neorealism, from which they borrowed techniques to realistically represent the socio-political conditions of India. Two of the foremost filmmakers associated with this movement are Shyam Benegal and Govind Nihalani.

The form has often raised academic discussion on the aesthetic differences between parallel film

and traditional commercial cinema, especially regarding the use of location shooting, the use of professional actors instead of artists within the star culture of Bollywood, and the depiction of somewhat understated narrative arcs. Das Gupta (1994) states that parallel cinema is characterized by its being a "cinema of concern" where socio-political reality is depicted through a unified combination of form and content. Kapur (2000) has situated parallel cinema within a broader framework of modernist cultural practices in India and linked it to issues of identity, nationhood, and representation.

The mainstream Hindi cinema is often concerned with the aesthetic of spectacle. Parallel cinema, on the other hand, adopts a more subtle aesthetic of observational realism, which is a suitable medium for the expression of complex historical experiences like Partition. Realism is the hallmark of the aesthetics of Parallel Cinema.

Research Gap

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, significant gaps exist in the understanding of Partition narrative representations in relation to Hindi parallel cinema. A significant gap exists in the inadequate integration of previous studies on memory and trauma into a more systematic framework for analysing their cinematic representations. Most literary analyses of Partition history have been presented as thematic examinations or theoretical inquiries, often neglecting the role of various aesthetic techniques in mediating memory and trauma.

Another gap is evident based on previous scholarly analysis on Hindi parallel cinema focusing largely on its socio-political contexts and ideological functions. Most scholars who have contributed to this field of study, however, have lacked significant attention to the potential of Hindi parallel cinema as a way of addressing historical trauma through formal innovations relating to the aesthetic nature of these films. More concentrated analyses addressing how film's narrative structure, visual composition, and sound design create an expressive means of conveying fragmented and unresolved experience is needed for this. This study addresses these gaps by bringing together trauma theory and film aesthetics in a close reading of selected screen texts.



METHODOLOGY

This study tries to examine the representation of partition trauma in Hindi parallel films by using qualitative, interpretive research methods and close textual analysis techniques. Research approaches include film studies and cultural studies with a special emphasis on the way cinematic form recreates our historical experience. Instead of considering films to be a direct representation of actual reality, the study considers them created visual texts that create meaning through the interactions between narrative, aesthetics and spectator viewing.

Two films - *Garam Hawa* (1974) and *Tamas* (1988) has been selected through purposive sampling based on their thematic relevance to India's Partition as well as their connection to the realist and socially committed ethos of parallel cinema. The analysis of the study employs a theoretical framework that integrates trauma theory and film aesthetics to guide the analysis of narrative and visual forms. The analysis focuses on narrative structure, visual composition, sound and silence, and thematic articulation. The key concepts that guide the identification and analysis of narrative and visual forms are fragmentation, belatedness, silence and repetition. Further, close reading has been used as the method of analysis, where individual sequences were analysed in detail to identify how formal elements produce meaning.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Trauma as Fragmented Experience

In *Garam Hawa*, trauma is not conveyed through spectacular violence; rather, it comes about slowly through an erosion of stability that takes place over time. The story follows Salim Mirza as he becomes increasingly economically and socially marginalised. However, the film refuses to build up to any major dramatic events in the usual way. Instead of using a conventional dramatic structure, *Garam Hawa* uses elliptical narration and temporal gaps throughout the film, to construct a sense of trauma as a part of daily life, as opposed to just one event or moment of trauma. An example of this is when members of

Salim's family leave for Pakistan. Rather than being portrayed as one unique climactic moment, these departures are portrayed as unremarkable and almost routine. The use of elliptical narration and temporal gaps creates what trauma theory defines as belatedness, where all emotions associated with trauma are delayed and spread out over time.

Tamas also creates trauma through highlighting a different aspect of communal tension and violence. An example of this is the opening sequence of *Nathu* being coerced to kill a pig to incite rioting later. Here, violence is a function of ordinary life which is reinforced by the minimal background music and extended visual duration of this act, creating a sense of disunity that foreshadows future disaster. In this case, trauma is created not only at the time of violence, but also through a series of interrelated events that reveal trauma's structural and systemic nature.

Migration, Displacement, and Spatial Dislocation

Both *Garam Hawa* and *Tamas* illustrate a common theme of spatial dislocation, symbolizing the breakdown of belonging. Within *Garam Hawa*, doorways and spaces devoid of life are utilized repetitively as visual representations of separation and the responsibility of a home. The scene in which the Mirza family leaves their family house offers framed shots and dark lighting to create a sense of sorrow associated with departing from a home. The once safe structure now becomes nothing but a shell, reflecting how one's identity has been scattered.

Tamas explores displacement through collective and larger movements such as the mobility of people seeking refuge. The visual representations of large refugee movements offer viewers an understanding of how social norms break down. People are often shown clustered together attempting to use the same means of transport or their inability to find shelter. The use of wide shots with deep focus is indicative of how widespread movement has taken place, while the absence of a central character dissolves the experience of displacement into a shared experience, as

Table 1: Comparative Thematic Analysis of Partition Narratives in Hindi Parallel Cinema

Analytical Theme	<i>Garam Hawa</i>	<i>Tamas</i>	Analytical Insight
Trauma Representation	Trauma unfolds gradually through everyday experiences- economic decline, social isolation, and family fragmentation (e.g., repeated departures to Pakistan).	Trauma emerges through episodic depiction of escalating communal violence (e.g., pig carcass incident triggering riots).	Trauma is fragmented and cumulative, rather than confined to singular events; represented through both intimate and collective registers.
Narrative Structure	Linear yet elliptical narrative with temporal gaps and subdued dramatic progression.	Episodic and multi-perspectival structure, shifting across characters and communities.	Both disrupt narrative continuity, reflecting non-linearity and belatedness of trauma.
Migration & Displacement	Interiorised displacement, loss of home and identity symbolised through eviction from ancestral house.	Large-scale visible displacement, refugee caravans, camps, and chaotic movement.	Contrasts personal vs collective spatial dislocation, showing multiple scales of Partition experience.
Spatial Representation	Use of confined domestic spaces, closed doors, and empty interiors to signify exclusion.	Expansive outdoor spaces streets, villages, refugee routes depicting social breakdown.	Space functions as a visual metaphor for belonging and rupture.
Gendered Violence	Implied and internalised trauma through Amina's silence, abandonment, and eventual suicide.	Explicit depiction of violence against women within communal conflict.	Highlights visible vs invisible trauma, and the gendered burden of Partition.
Aesthetic Style	Minimalism long takes, silence, static framing, subdued performances.	Realist yet expansive ambient sound, natural lighting, restrained depiction of violence.	Both employ aesthetic restraint to avoid sensationalism and evoke ethical engagement.
Use of Silence	Silence dominates interpersonal interactions, signalling emotional breakdown and repression.	Silence punctuates moments of tension and aftermath of violence.	Silence operates as a key narrative device representing the unspeakability of trauma.
Representation of Violence	Largely off-screen; suggested through consequences rather than depiction.	Direct but non-sensational representation of riots and brutality.	Shows spectrum from implicit to explicit violence, both resisting spectacle.
Memory & Temporality	Focus on aftermath; trauma unfolds as lingering, unresolved condition.	Focus on onset and immediacy of violence; memory formed in real-time.	Creates a temporal continuum of trauma before, during, and after Partition.
Nation & Identity	Explores Muslim identity and belonging in post-Partition India (Salim Mirza's dilemma).	Examines communal identities across religious groups amid political manipulation.	Challenges singular nationalist narratives, foregrounding ambiguity and conflict.
Ending / Closure	Open-ended; participation in protest suggests uncertain hope.	No clear resolution; violence and displacement remain ongoing.	Both reject closure, reinforcing trauma as unresolved and continuous.

Source: Author's analysis of *Garam Hawa* and *Tamas*

opposed to an individual's trauma as seen within *Garam Hawa*. Whereas *Garam Hawa* confers the experience of displacement through the trauma of a person, *Tamas* depicts displacement externally within a large and ever-changing landscape where movement is constant and uncertain.

Gendered Violence and the Body as Site of Trauma

The gendered aspects of Partition are foregrounded by both cinematic texts but in very different ways in terms of the narrative strategies. Amina's trajectory

in *Garam Hawa* is representative of the unspoken weight of trauma. The repeated occurrence of Amina's abandonment when her marriage alliances are broken are depicted through visual stillness and emotional withdrawal. The eventual suicide is not preceded by a dramatic confrontation, but instead through a gradual build-up of silence, illustrating the internalisation of trauma. The absence of verbal expression becomes one form of testimony.

There is a more explicit representation of gendered violence within *Tamas*, although the film is still framed within a general critique of communal and patriarchal structures. Abduction and sexual violence are treated with a raw sense of realism and little reliance on sensationalism. The camera tends to take a dispassionate approach, which prevents the viewer from being voyeuristically involved, even while the viewer is made to witness the violent realities of the events. This dialectic of seeing and not seeing signals the ethics of representing violence, and the female body as a site of symbolic and material contestation.

Visual Composition: Framing, Mise-en-scène, and Spatial Representation

Visual composition is essential to how *Garam Hawa* conveys the trauma of the main characters. The majority of the movie uses still frames or medium-long camera shots to show the main characters in small spaces inside their homes, illustrating the way they feel trapped both emotionally and physically. There is little signage or light available to enhance those feelings. Throughout the film, doorways, windows, and hallways impede the viewer's line of sight into the character's lives creating a sense of isolation from the outside world. As the original tenants begin leaving the home, this conveys the overall feeling of dislocation for the tenants when they are gone. The patient, silent depiction of the tenants and their inability to change their current state allows the trauma to be experienced rather than creating an emotional response to the situation being shown.

In contrast, *Tamas* uses visual composition to express the scale and fragmentation of collective violence. Close-ups of moments juxtaposed

between expansive long shots gives a movement between experiencing violence on a small scale (individual suffering) and on a larger (mass suffering). Cluttered streets, religious sites and places of refuge show the chaos of disruption in our society through mis-en-scène. The way space is represented dynamically refers to the chaos of fragmentation and destruction, particularly in scenes of public disorder where the motion of the camera represents the instability and loss of control. Conversely, the stillness in composed static camera angles allows time for the audience to grasp the seriousness of violence. Further, these videos use natural light and real locations to add realism and provide traumatic experiences in familiar socio-cultural spaces. Overall, both cinematic texts show how frame, mise-en-scène and spatial organisation are key aesthetics to express trauma from the Partition.

Aesthetic Strategies: Silence, Minimalism, and Realism

Sound and silence are key aesthetic techniques that mediate trauma in *Garam Hawa* and *Tamas*. They shape the way stories are told and influence how audiences experience the Partition. In both films, the acoustic aspect of the story avoids a melodramatic style, favouring restraint, emptiness, and disconnection as ways to describe the violence experienced during the Partition.

In contrast, although *Tamas* uses an equally managed auditory landscape, it varies in terms of level and type of noise within its landscape. The use of different types of sound within *Tamas* helps create a sense of chaos and violence through its combination of sound including crowd noise, religious chanting, sounds of violence and silence. This back-and-forth rhythm creates tension and release in the audience that is reflective of the unpredictable growth of violent acts. For example, many times throughout *Tamas* silence takes place after a period of extreme chaos. Rather than providing any form of comfort or resolution, the silence enhances feelings of confusion and loss.

In both cinematic texts, silence is not emptiness but a productive aesthetic gesture that signals the limits of representation and the difficulty of articulating traumatic experience. In theoretical

terms, this corresponds to the notion that trauma cannot be directly narrated, but rather comes to be in gaps, disruptions and sensory disjunction. If there is sound, it does not relieve this tension but rather emphasizes it, marking the fine line between articulation and inexpressibility. Thus, the acoustic strategies of *Garam Hawa* and *Tamas* form a part of a larger cinematic grammar of trauma in which silence, ambient sound and sonic discontinuity combine to evoke the affective and experiential dimension of Partition beyond the limits of visual representation.

Memory, Nation, and Ethical Representation

Both *Garam Hawa* and *Tamas* shed light on dominant themes of nationhood by foregrounding marginalised experiences. The climax of *Garam Hawa* shows Salim Mirza joining a political march, symbolizing the beginning of a new identity for him. The ending leaves an awful lot of uncertainty about how people can belong to a new India that has just been formed after the Partition.

Tamas has many different perspectives on the situation, making it hard to see the action from one viewpoint. It depicts instances of religiously motivated violence and doesn't attempt to simplify these events to "us vs. them" scenarios. Rather, it highlights the common vulnerability of people who are caught up in larger political dynamics.

These cinematic texts are an alternative to historical records or archetypes of the past. By offering alternative ways of remembering through realism, they establish past traumas as unresolved and ongoing conditions and, in this way, change the relationship between history, cinema and memory.

As shown in table 1, these two films differ in the ways in which they represent the fragmented nature of partition trauma. These films depict both personal and collective experiences, providing an overall impression of the fragmentation and multilayered character of partition trauma.

DISCUSSION

The analyses show how Partition is depicted in *Garam Hawa* and *Tamas* does not follow a

progression or an event-driven model. Instead, both films focus on trauma as a disjointed, temporally disconnected, and emotionally enduring state of being, which is in keeping with the assumptions of trauma theory. More specifically, the dispersed narrative structure and use of silence in the narratives echo Cathy Caruth's description of trauma as an event that has not been completely integrated into one's consciousness at the time of the event, but instead reemerges at later times in indirect or unarticulated ways. Furthermore, the abandonment of closure in both narratives emphasizes the idea that trauma represents an uncompleted process as opposed to an event in the past that has been resolved.

The results show that trauma is not only a theme but inscribed in the aesthetic logic of the cinematic texts. *Garam Hawa* uses a minimalist style of narrative ellipsis and visual restraint to produce a "aesthetics of absence" in which meaning is created through the unshown rather than the shown. *Tamas*, however, takes this logic to an extreme in its multi-perspectival narration, displacing agency and destabilizing singular points of identification. These formal strategies reinforce film-theoretical arguments that realism operates as a mediated mode of ethical engagement, rather than offering transparent access to reality, and that it enables spectators to confront historical violence without sensationalising it.

The contrast between the personal, interiorized trauma of *Garam Hawa* and the far-flung, collective violence of *Tamas* only further muddies the usual distinctions between personal and historical memory. These registers do not operate as discrete categories but intersect and speak to each other, implying that individual subjectivity is always already situated within wider socio-political structures. This finding is in line with the work in the field of cultural memory which emphasizes the mediated and relational character of remembering. Memory in both cinematic texts is not a stable archive, but a process of negotiation, mediated through absence, repetition and affective intensity.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals the complex gendered aspects of trauma and the limitations of existing historiography that has excluded



women's experiences. The implicit and internalised representations in *Garam Hawa*, and *Tamas*'s demonstrate how the cinematic form mediates visibility and invisibility. The two works can be framed as an ethical act of witnessing in that they represent violence in a manner designed to avoid both erasure and exploitation.

Both cinematic texts provide important challenges to nationalist narratives that attempt to provide closure or coherence to the history of Partition. The use of ambiguity, contradiction, and lingering suffering within the work produce counter-archives which provide an alternative means of understanding the past and an alternative way of disrupting the official history. This corresponds closely to critiques in post-colonial literature which also challenge national identity as stable and demonstrate that subjectivities have been fragmented as a result of Partition.

Taken as a whole, the results provide evidence that Hindi parallel films employ unique aesthetic techniques to build a critical lens through which the complexities of Partition can be viewed. Moreover, these films do not just depict the trauma associated with Partition but also transform the ways in which we can understand what it means to be traumatized, moving the emphasis from the event itself (spectacle) to how people felt about the event (affect), from being an event to being something experienced (experience) and finally, moving away from an understanding of the end of trauma (closure) to an understanding of ongoing trauma (continuity). Thus, Hindi parallel films create new avenues and paths for film as a vehicle for ethical or historical investigation. They provide important spaces for visual narratives related to the continued impact of Partition.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the relationship between the depiction of Partition trauma through the movie *Garam Hawa* and *Tamas*. The finding reveals that both films communicate Partition trauma beyond conventional historical representations by depicting it as an unrelenting, unresolved state of being through both fragmented experience and

ongoing affective presence. By combining trauma theory with a detailed analysis of cinematic texts, the study has illustrated how the traumatic experience of Partition has not only been documented via narrative text but has been interwoven into the very fabric of realist cinema text.

The findings identify narrative ellipsis, silence, spatial dislocation and episodic fragmentation as formal devices through which trauma is negotiated. Thus, these cinematic texts refuse melodramatic closure and challenge dominant nationalist historiographies, offering a more nuanced and ethically engaged account of violence, displacement and identity. The contrast between the personalised, interiorised experiences in *Garam Hawa* and the collective, multi-perspectival representation in *Tamas* further highlights the multiplicity of Partition narratives ranging from the individual to the historical register.

This study contributes to film and trauma studies by underlining the importance of cinematic form in the representation of historical violence, especially in the Hindi parallel cinema. More generally, it casts visual narratives as important sites for the negotiation of cultural memory and ethical witnessing in postcolonial contexts.

However, the study is limited by its focus on a small corpus and future studies could expand this analysis to other regional cinemas, transnational Partition narratives, or audience reception studies. Such directions would further enrich our understanding of the ways in which Partition remains remembered, mediated and contested in various cultural and cinematic contexts.

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