

Recounting History and Rendering Memories: *Viceroy's House* as a Narrative of the Partition of India

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Abstract

It is an indubitable fact that of all the atrocities that the British meted out to Indians, the one that has had the longest bearing and the most profound repercussions on the people of this nation is the partition of India. Decades later, the memories of that event remain alive in the psyche of Indians due to the active functioning of time-binding processes manifested through various institutions. This paper argues that the 2017 movie *Viceroy's House* restores the collective memories of the partition of India by uncovering the events that led to it and projecting its repercussions through the function of post-memory on one hand, and the installation of prosthetic memory on the other.

Keywords: Collective memory; Partition; Post-memory; Prosthetic memory.

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Introduction

History is interpretive. Every time a historical event is retold, it acquires a new character. The recounting of historical events contributes to the formation of new memories and activates existing ones. India, as a country, has witnessed many events, both glorious and tumultuous in its evolution as an independent nation. As a country that was made and marred by many invasions and subsequent settlements, India holds a massive repository of memories at its core. Despite many such invasions, the one that sculpted India as we know it today is, irrefutably, that of the British Raj. It is an indubitable fact that of all the atrocities that the British meted out to Indians, the one that has had the longest bearing and the most profound repercussions on the people of this nation is the partition of India. The events that led to the partition of India and its aftermath have since

been subjected to rigorous analyses, interpretations, documentation, and retellings. Any representation of Indian history considers the partition of India an indispensable topic; hence, the event has been widely depicted in media, textbooks, documentaries, and films. This paper argues that the 2017 movie *Viceroy's House* restores the collective memories of the partition of India by uncovering the events that led to it and projecting its repercussions through the function of post-memory on one hand, and the installation of prosthetic memory on the other.

Directed by Gurinder Chadha, *Viceroy's House* is based on *Freedom at Midnight*, a 1975 non-fiction book by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre that documents the last years of the British Raj in India and *The Shadow of the Great Game – The Untold Story of Partition* by Narendra Singh Sarila. The film, which was dubbed and released in India under the title *Partition: 1947* depicts the historical facts that led to the division of India and the formation of Pakistan with a special focus on the last viceroy of the British Raj in India, Lord Mountbatten, his wife Edwina Mountbatten, and other prominent Indian historical figures and British officers. Set against the fictional backdrop of a love story between Jeet Kumar and Aalia Noor, which serves as a narrative technique to highlight the Hindu-Muslim tension that peaked during that time, the movie realistically portrays both the atmosphere that led to the partition and the one that emanated as a result. The movie shows how the partition was a wily engineered event in which data was manipulated, emotions were exploited and thoughts were destabilized. While the last viceroy of the British Raj and his wife are portrayed as empathetic figures, the movie does not refrain from presenting the tactful activities of the British that eventually led to the partition of India.

Viceroy's House: Partition and Collective Memory

Memory, individual or collective, attains actuality through the process of remembering. "Remembering", as Keightley puts it, "is an active reconciliation of past and present" (58). This intrinsic process of remembering necessitates numerous factors such as an incident, narration, documentation, or a representation that would serve as a vehicle connecting the present and the past. This vehicle would subsequently reveal a set of past events, preserving them as distinct chapters in the minds of those who would carry them as memories. Evidently, films function exceptionally well as such vehicles due to their unique visual language and ubiquitous appeal. However, the authenticity of the events portrayed and the accountability of its creators are of paramount significance, especially when a film claims to retell an important historical event.

Viceroy's House integrates history by presenting it with a fictional overtone and serves as a collective memory of the future, as the central themes of religious intolerance, Hindu-Muslim tension, and political leaders exploiting their adherents did not culminate with the partition of India in 1947, but continue to permeate the socio-political landscape of the country. The question as to what is remembered and what is not is of paramount significance. Agencies that operate at multiple levels in strengthening the memories of an event at the expense of others are often responsible for the shaping of active collective memory. These agencies are predominantly the centres of power and perform a critical role in governance and institutionalization. They mould the occurrence of events and their consequences besides filtering them for future generations as history and collective memory. *Viceroy's House* illustrates this when Gandhiji poses the question, "And which God among you decides where the border falls?" (53:41) as the nationalist leaders, in the presence of Lord Mountbatten, decide to divide India, with half of Punjab and half of Bengal forming the new country.

The Indian independence struggles and the atrocities faced by Indians during the colonial reign are recurrently reflected in narratives that have an inherent ability to corroborate what they state and possess a ubiquitous appeal to it. The dominant patriotic theme in this movie resonates deeply with the Indian audience, and this nationalistic cause has manifested itself through numerous celebrated literary and visual works. The movie under study portrays characters who, irrespective of their religious beliefs, oppose the partition of India and believe that religious fervor should not block the path to a united and independent nation. The film also depicts how some believe that they need a country of their own, where they will no longer be deemed a minority, even at the cost of India's unity. The collective memory internalized by the respective groups from their immediate circumstances has shaped their differing viewpoints. These groups have an identity and a set of requirements, all deeply rooted in what they believe to be their essence. As Barry Schwartz opines,

individual memories are the fundamental units of collective memory, but collective memory itself...refers to the distribution throughout society of what individuals, know, believe, and feel about the past, how they judge the past morally, how closely they identify with it, and how much they are inspired by it as a model for their conduct and identity (10).

At multiple junctures, the film depicts the Hindu-Muslim tension that reached the zenith in 1947 from various perspectives. There are references to riots that broke out in various parts of Punjab and other provinces and how the helpers at the Viceroy's house formed two groups vying against each other in the name of religion. The Partition of India should thus be considered the result of collective memories of differences and disagreements that have exacerbated the already strained relationship between Hindus and Muslims. The apprehensions of the Hindu-Muslim couple, Jeet and Aalia, regarding their union highlight the general awareness of the religious differences, while the contending groups of helpers at the Viceroy's house epitomize the deepening disagreements that had largely overshadowed the unity of the country. The film illustrates how collective memories have made individuals hostile to each other, not out of personal vengeance, but due to the beliefs instilled in them. "You dance with your own kind," (29:52) says a character representing the Muslim community to Aalia who was asked for a dance by Jeet at a marriage function to which "since when does a Mussalman tell us what to do?" (30:10) is the response from a character who represents the Hindu community. Thus, a conversation between two individuals quickly transformed into an argument between two religious groups vying for their supremacy. Similarly, the film highlights how political leaders Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru used religious perspectives to alienate from one another and judge the thought processes of the general public they represent.

Just as the manipulation of collective memories among Hindus and Muslims led to the partition of India, the event has also generated sets of memories for the country and for the world to analyze and reflect upon. Although the partition and the events leading up to it are explained and interpreted differently across various narratives, certain elements of similarity can be seen despite the differing perspectives. The partition witnessed the largest migration in recorded human history, with many families being torn apart and many losing their homes, lands, and even their lives. The violence and injustice unleashed on these people were so appalling that they were both physically and emotionally devastated, leaving them and their progenies struggling to attain a proper identity. This event, now implanted in the collective memory of the nation at large was marked by "a mutual genocide as unexpected as it was unprecedented" and "the carnage was especially intense, with massacres, arson, forced conversions, mass abductions, and savage sexual violence. Some seventy-five thousand women were raped, and many of them were then disfigured or dismembered" (Dalrymple).

According to Wang,

to understand the processes, practices, and outcomes of social sharing of memory, or collective remembering, one must take into account the characteristics of the community to which a significant event occurred and in which memory for the event was subsequently formed, shared, transmitted, and transformed. In other words, one must look into the social- cultural-historical context where the remembering takes place (305).

The partition of India is thus a historical event that has precipitated collective memories of a section of the society, with its retellings becoming the “historical context” for remembrance.

Viceroy's House: Partition and Post-Memory

While the partition remains a collective memory of the groups involved and that of the countries at large, the event and its aftermath have also occupied special places in individual memories as well. Generations later, people still feel the pain of their ancestors who were uprooted from their homeland and whose families were torn apart. The film’s exceptional portrayal of the events related to the partition owes much to the fact that the director Gurinder Chadha, comes from a family that had to bear the consequences of the respective event.

“It’s a very personal film...It’s my own personal family story. Partition was the largest forced migration in human history. Fourteen million people became refugees overnight including my family. Growing up in England I was always aware that I never had an ancestral homeland because my homeland has become this other new country called Pakistan...” says Gurinder Chadha in a discussion about the respective film. (Chadha 05:43-06:06) The renowned theorist Marianne Hirsch defines this phenomenon, in which the memories of an event are actively present in the minds of those who are born after the actual event, as post-memory.

An individual’s experiences and circumstances often find channels to seep into generations of posterity. Narratives are powerful agents in conveying such stories, and these subjective delineations exert a strong influence on their listeners. These stories about the yesteryears in due course form a niche in individuals who would then discern it on various levels and internalize them as memories, post the actual occurrence, nonetheless. Marianne Hirsch in her essay titled “Connective Arts of Postmemory,” says that

postmemory describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma or transformation of those who came before-to events that they “remember” only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up. But these events were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right (172).

Likewise, the partition of India, an event of significant magnitude, must have profoundly shaped the post-memory of many individuals. Whether these memories have a healthy influence or whether they transform into traumatic ones, and how they give an expression to it, varies from person to person. As *Viceroy's House* concludes, the director implicitly suggests that the character of Aalia - a woman who finally reunites with her love interest, Jeet. in the refugee camp set up after the partition - is inspired by her grandmother, who was similarly estranged from her family during the partition of India, only to reunite with her husband in a refugee camp. Thus, the director's post-memory manifests through inspired characters and a full-fledged film.

Viceroy's House, the result of its director's post-memory, encompasses multiple references to the possible emergence of post-memories. For instance, children born to Aalia, a freedom fighter's daughter, and Jeet, whose father died in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the rest of whose family was slaughtered in the partition mayhem would develop deep memories about all these events as “mediated acts of transfer” (Hirsch 172) enabling them to possess it.

Viceroy's House uniquely stages realistic footage of the outcomes of the partition of India. Accordingly, the film serves purposes of more than a source of entertainment; instead, it becomes a source of infotainment. The descendants of those who survived and those who could not survive the mayhem of the partition are spread across the world. Films like these serve as reminders of the actual event and the difficulties the ancestors had to endure. It also provides an authentic portrayal of the incidents to those who have never been exposed to any documentation or oral narratives from previous generations. Thus, the film works as an agent in refining or, in some cases, instilling memories of a crucial event that defines their identity and developing post-memory of both the event and their predecessors who experienced it in real. Discussing the concept of post-memory, Hirsch opines that “it makes space for alternative potential histories, enjoining us to imagine what might have been, in addition to

what was" (175). This faculty of "imagining" cannot be owned by those who experienced it firsthand but only by those who came after, thereby rewriting - or re-righting - history through post-memory.

Viceroy's House: Partition and Prosthetic Memory

Historical events tend to have lasting impacts not only on those who witnessed and experienced them but also on those who are distanced from them temporally, spatially, and genealogically. This impact is exerted by the different modes of representation that bridge the differences resulting in an artificial or prosthetic memory. Alison Lansberg names this memory, which is formed and disseminated through media or other modern technologies as prosthetic memory. *Viceroy's House*, as a depiction of the partition of India, can instill prosthetic memory in the viewers, enabling them to develop a set of perceptions through which they analyze similar contemporary events. What differentiates prosthetic memory from post-memory is that the former is shaped by a technological device or a media form that authentically mediates the past to the individual whereas the latter is formed through one's connection with those who directly experienced the event.

As Landsberg opines,

mass cultural commodities, [like] images and narratives about the past, [that] are mediated through the cultural, political and social worlds of individuals...profoundly [affect] an individual's subjectivity. The radical potential of prosthetic memory derives from the fact that the subjectivities they produce are not 'natural'...(151).

The interspersed real-life footage of the refugee camps and the turbulence-torn lands subjected to partition, as shown in the film under study, functions as an archive to comprehend the ramifications of the incident. Additionally, the technological authenticity of its portrayal enables the viewers to internalize it. These viewers will be deeply moved by such depictions, and the notions they derive from them will be stored in their consciousness as prosthetic memory, prompting the person to make further inquiries.

Yi Zou in his study of prosthetic memory and what Alison Lansberg thinks about it says

a memory which does not come from personal experience is more effectively produced and transferred by mass cultural technologies. Even if this type of memory is filled with mediated images and narratives, Landsberg believes it functions as organic memory which configures and reconfigures people's understanding of ethical relationships (131).

Thus, the film *Viceroy's House*, presented in the mass cultural format, bridges the "temporal chasms" (Lansberg 148) through images and narratives, generating prosthetic memory of the partition in the viewers despite their distance from the real event. This, in turn, yields a set of perceptions that influence their sense of identity.

Conclusion

The emotional impact of the partition of India finds resonance in many parts of the world. The events leading to the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan have had a strong bearing on the consciousness of its people besides the political tensions that have evolved. Even those who are temporally, spatially, and genealogically distanced from the partition and the related events are influenced by its repercussions. This paper examines why partition has such an enduring impact on the people of India. The paper argues that the historical events that happened in 1947 persist in the collective consciousness of the people of India not just as historical narratives but as memories. By analyzing how a form of documentation or a retelling like *Viceroy's House* has the potential to invoke post-memories or instill prosthetic memories in a person, the paper demonstrates how a film can shape collective memories shared by a large group of people.

Films have a global appeal. Various cinematic techniques and the unique visual language of films can leave a deep impression on viewers. Nevertheless, when history is retold through films, the elements of fictionalization and the extent of dramatization cannot be ignored. However, studying films like *Viceroy's House* is important because of its universal impact. Besides its cinematic qualities, *Viceroy's House* portrays the atrocities that were inflicted upon people and the misery they endured. Genocide, forced migration, and mass deportation have occurred in many parts of the world. Just as India's collective consciousness is shaped by post-memories and prosthetic memories of the partition, this analysis can be extrapolated to examine the collective consciousness of communities of such affected areas worldwide.

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