



## The Mind Getting Debilitated: A Detailed Study on *Earth*

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### Abstract:

This paper will posit on the barbaric episodes of the Partition of India by considering Deepa Mehta's film "*Earth*" (1998) which is an adaptation of Bapsi Sidhwa's semi-autobiographical novel named "*Cracking India*" (Milkweed Editions, 1988). This paper will be an elucidation on how the film is an evocation of the agitated times during Partition as witnessed by eight-year-old polio-stricken Parsi child Lenny (Maia Sethna). Lenny's all-time companion was her ayah Shanta (Nandita Das) with whom she used to visit the adjacent areas of her residence in Lahore and was subsequently learning how Partition was introducing changes in the demographics of her hometown. Since the plot of the film is being narrated by a novice child, therefore, it does not hint at any specific political leader, organization, or other forces involved in the Partition of 1947, but it depicts the tragic repercussions undergone by the common people of the nation due to the fallacious decisions taken by the administration of the country. The growing aversion among the inhabitants of Lahore is visible when a group of friends hailing from different religious communities like Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Parsis were seen to be changing while their simple discussion on the prevailing political scenario in Lahore turns into blows. Deepa Mehta strives to deliver through the observation of Lenny, the universal message about sorrow, loss, pain and that emerged from Partition. The abhorrence between Hindus and Muslims continues and this is shown when jovial characters like Dilnawaz (Amir Khan) the ice candy man, turn negative when he avenges the death of his sisters and simultaneously takes his revenge on Shanta who turned down his proposal for marriage because she was in a relationship with Hassan (Rahul Khanna). In this film, for many others like Dilnawaz, logic, practical thinking, morale took a back seat and all they were concerned with was taking revenge on each other. The question of the worthiness of Partition crosses the mind of the viewers. Thus, in this paper, I shall attempt to address questions like, in what way did India gain from Partition? Was it both necessary and unavoidable in the first place? This paper will be an attempt to expound how the formation of Pakistan or the dissection of a nation on religious disparity, ultimately "disables" the entire nation along with the fact that, the sense of unity and the sense of peacefully co-existing with each other too gets "disabled" since the majority of the population had turned hostile towards each other. How did the ultimate fate of Shanta and Lenny change in the film?

**Keywords:** Partition, religion, trauma, prejudice, violence.



15<sup>th</sup> August 1947, the day India was free from the two-hundred-year-old colonial regimes, marked the commencement of complex political issues. This day will remain etched in the pages of history. The apparent Independence of the country divided it based on religious discrimination. The British administration, withdrew its authority from India, on the condition that, the nation would be divided on the grounds of religious discrimination. This decision led to the birth of an Islamic nation named Pakistan, on both the western and eastern borders of the nation. This paper will be an elucidation on the intemperate incident of Partition and it has taken into consideration the film *Earth* (1999) directed by Deepa Mehta, from her trilogy *Fire, Earth and Water*. This film is based on Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*<sup>1</sup> and questions the authenticity of the freedom achieved by the country, on the occasion of fifty years of Independence of India. Besides highlighting the typical scenario of the country during the era of Partition, it also shows how violence and prejudice were being ingrained in the minds of every individual of the nation, the extraordinarily complicated political decisions which led to the unfortunate division of the country on the eastern and western parts followed by the mass exodus. The Radcliff Line eventually introduced drastic changes in the demographics of the nation, and the forced migration made the religious distinction more prominent. Before the decision of Partition, the Hindus and Muslims stayed in complete harmony and unity. With the eventual change in the demographics of the nation and the mass exodus, political agitations were increasing and the scenario prior to the independence of the nation was undergoing a drastic change. The theme of this film describes the repercussions of Partition and the ensuing violence that occurred on the western border of India by focusing on Lahore.<sup>2</sup>(Presently in Pakistan)

The plot of the film begins by introducing Lenny,<sup>3</sup> the eight-year-old Parsee girl who is the narrator of the story. The plot of the film has been described as per the observations of a novice girl who could not comprehend why the environment around her was changing and was oblivious of the impact it would have on her. The film narrates about the scenario when there were rumours that there would be a new Muslim nation named Pakistan, but does not portray people rejoicing in the independence of the country. Lenny questions the authenticity and rationality of Partition, as she accidentally breaks a porcelain plate. Lenny's character renders what Kavita Daiya in her text *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender and National Culture in Postcolonial India* (2008) describes as 'coming of age in a bourgeois household to an idealized, romanticized family life depicted in sepia tones, soft focus, and lighting in warm



colours<sup>4</sup>. Though it seems to be a minor incident, however, this can be evaluated as metaphorical of the fact that the entire Indian subcontinent would very soon be divided owing to faulty administration and communal disturbance. This scene prepares the viewers to witness successive catastrophic events of Partition that the film has to offer. This is followed by introducing the female lead of this film, Shanta, Lenny's "ayah". <sup>5</sup>(Governess) Shanta rebukes her and everyone present is awestruck when Lenny innocently asks her mother<sup>6</sup>, "Can one break a country?" and none of the adults could answer that, as it made everyone present on the spot feel perplexed. Lenny's mother tries to soothe the situation and calls the country being divided to be illogical rumours, however, with the progress of the film, we find that she will be proved wrong. In the ensuing scene, we find Lenny and Shanta, visiting the local park adjacent to their residence. This park is the location where mostly the male characters of the film are introduced. These men hail from different communities and are the residents of the locality. The statements they utter highlight that, their jocular comments and admiration towards Shanta, the only female member in the group; most of the time would turn hostile. Among these men is Hassan the "maalishwala" <sup>7</sup>and Dil Nawaz who is called "Ice candywala" <sup>8</sup> who seem to be competing against each other to receive Shanta's affection. While the Hindu men would want Nehru to be their leader, the Muslim men would express their objection because if Nehru becomes the leader then the Muslims would be marginalized. The prime topic of discussion would be the formation of a separate group which segregated from the Congress. This discussion can be termed as a precursor to the impending discrimination between the two communities due to the divide-and-rule policy taken by the administration.<sup>9</sup> Though Shanta is amicable to both Hassan and Nawaz, in a very subtle manner we find her to be more inclined towards Hassan. These scenes are placed in complete contradiction to the following one where it has been shown how Lenny's car gets trampled by a Muslim mob when she goes out for a drive with her parents. The slogan '*Hindustan murdabaad, Pakistan zindabad*'—(Down with India, Long live Pakistan, (translation mine) marks the beginning of the imminent danger which gets intermittently portrayed in certain scenes and it can be said that the film tries to explicate how gradually the political situation would go out of control and how the majority of the population of the nation would turn bloodthirsty.

Besides the vehemence of Partition, this film also renders the sexual violence that women undergo. The foremost instance would be when Lenny's five-year-old friend Pappu gets



married to a very aged man almost the age of her grandfather which invariably shocks her. Child marriage was an evil practice which is further heightened by her parents who very capriciously say that they would want their daughter to get married only after she turns sixteen. This remark, however, brings respite to Lenny however from the perception of a viewer, it is supposed to be creating unease in an individual's mind since child marriage is illegal in the country. Furthermore, the hatred towards Hindus in Nawaz increases when his sisters get killed and he comes across their mutilated body parts packed up in gunny bags and dumped inside the train that is headed from Gurudaspur to Lahore. Nawaz and the other men besides Hassan are seen to be growing truculent against one another. This ultimately has an impact on his bonding with his companions and most importantly his link with Shanta and Hassan also goes through a major change. Although the brutalities and the changing demographics do not seem to be having any repercussions on Shanta and Hassan, however, they are well aware of the rigorous changes that their hometown was undergoing. The way Shanta and Hassan continued with their relationship despite the barbarity of Partition and political turmoil, is rather in complete contrast to the prior scenes where religious prejudice did not have any impact on them.

Nawaz eventually feels betrayed when Shanta turns down his marriage proposal since she is in love with Hassan. In this context, a comparison invariably is depicted between Hassan and Nawaz. While Nawaz's character has been given a subsequent negative light, Hassan has been shown as the ideal lover for Shanta who readily agrees to get converted to Hinduism and settle in India. The prime characters who were introduced in the initial scenes of the film are not migrating directly. Through their conversation with Nawaz, we merely get a slight insight that owing to the political agitations the Hindus will soon be migrating to India. The rest of the population who did not intend to migrate to India, took converting into Islam as the last resort.<sup>10</sup>

With the gradual progress of the film, an overall change is observed in the entire personality of Nawaz. The man whom we got introduced to, as jovial by nature and has an amiable demeanor, suddenly turning revengeful. This is evident when in one of the scenes it is shown how in an unsympathetic way he says that he does not regret bombing several Hindu households. The change in his facial expressions is clear when he smirks when a fire brigade



coming to a locality inhabited by the Hindus pours oil on the flames which had engulfed more than half of the residences.

The ferocity that led to the increase in communal agitations heightened the process of population exchange when we find Lenny and her friend conversing with a boy who was staying behind her house. The two kids try to befriend that boy who merely cries and informs of his mother getting gang-raped by Hindu men. This scene is ironic since the three children term raped women as '*giri hui aurat*'<sup>11</sup> and they find this pejorative term to be utterly intriguing.<sup>12</sup> The concept of rape they were discussing is something for which a woman is to be held accountable. It is the naïve nature of these children to be making such statements, but this directly points out mentality and the treatment meted out to those women who have been physically abused. Besides this, it has also been shown how they tear a doll apart and think that its original form can be regained by stitching it up. The remark by Lenny's friend 'Why be mean when you can't stand it' is a question asked to the faulty administration for their hasty decision of dividing the country on no concrete grounds. The torn doll cannot be stitched back to its original form, is metaphor for a broken country which too cannot regain its original harmony and unity. The broken country will rather be a witness of innumerable communal riots, people being inculcated with religious prejudice, thereby damaging the age-old civilization for which the nation was once known.

As the film approaches the end, we find Lenny walking down the streets with a gardener, Shanta, and Hassan's mutual friend Hari<sup>13</sup> who had converted to Islam and was renamed as Himmat Ali. Lenny was calling him by his original name which was making him feel tensed because he felt he might be attacked by the Muslims and insisted her to address him as Himmat Ali and not Hari. This made Lenny both inquisitive and disoriented since she failed to realize what made Hari change his name and identity. As they were walking, they come across the dead body of Hassan inside a sack that was lying against a lamppost. How and when Hassan was killed remains unanswered in the film. The dead body of the *maalishwala* intimidated Himmat Ali and Lenny and the two expected some kind of impending attack on them. The duo rush towards Lenny's bungalow, when suddenly an angry Muslim mob, chase them. The prime intention of the mob was to learn the whereabouts of Shanta. The mob had Nawaz as one of the supporters. This is where we get to see how the naïve Lenny discloses to Nawaz, that Shanta was hiding inside her residence which he conveys to the other men. The



mob forcefully enters Lenny's house and drag her out of the house. The semi-torn attire of Shanta is suggestive of her getting gang-raped by the Muslim men.<sup>14</sup> While Shanta is being dragged by the men, Lenny, her parents and Himmat Ali stand there as mere helpless onlookers. As viewers, obvious questions like where was she being taken, what was her ultimate faith, did anyone at all come to her rescue will hover in the mind.

In the final scene of the film, the adult Lenny is shown trying to walk towards a destination about whom the viewers are not sure. In this context, it can be observed that her leg becomes a symbol of a disabled nation, because in the film we find that, the partition which is accountable for the subsequent mass exodus and breaking up of an entire nation is obviously beyond any rectification or repair.

The question of the seriousness of Partition crosses the minds of the viewers once the film ends. Through the character of Lenny, the plot is narrated and her perception has been depicted to the viewers. But one may question, how is she able to narrate those incidents where she is not present. The probable answer might be that she might have heard or thought of the pattern of incidents in her mind and narrated it from an adult point of view. So there are two personalities found in this film, one the naïve child Lenny who was oblivious to the political agitations occurring in her locality, and the adult Lenny who has retained all the incidents that he had witnessed and was narrating them to the viewers to share the gory experiences she underwent. The paralyzed limb of Lenny was beyond any recovery, which is again used as a metaphor for a country that was broken and there was no solution to undo the decisions of the administration. The way throughout the entire film, we find Lenny dragging her leg to walk, which is metaphorical of the fact that the administration after Partition was also facing difficulties in introducing new protocols for the newly formed countries. Moreover, several communal riots added to the misery because of this, it took a lot of time for the political agitations to subside.

Therefore, through this film, Mehta tries to explicate the fact that, India lost its glory, harmony, and the importance of being a unified administration. The environment of the divided country went through a substantial change after its independence. It can also be said that independence was used as a minor measure for soothing out the decision of Partition. Since in India, religious and communal sentiments have always been a sensitive issue, hence these factors were utilized for creating disharmony and prejudice in the minds of the natives,



thereby making religious and political unrest to be very natural consequence of Partition. Furthermore, it can be said that this film is also suggestive of the fact that, due to Partition religious prejudice will ultimately become the sole reason behind political agitations and resolving such sensitive issues would be a hurdle.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Milkweed Editions 1991, originally published as "Ice Candy Man" in 1988, England.

<sup>2</sup> This point can be validated by mentioning the words of Anindita Ghoshal in the text *Revisiting Partition: Contestation, Narratives, and Memories*: "A Punjab bias in Partition research seems to have become so naturalized that it has often required no justification. Thus, Punjab-centric practices in partition historiography are still prominent. While 'Punjab-centrism' still tends to offer a model for Partition experiences, we have heard some arguments that call for going beyond the Indocentric bias of Partition studies, and challenging Indocentrism." (Ghoshal, pp. 245-246)

<sup>3</sup> Played by Maia Sethna and her adult form are audible in the voice of Shabana Azmi.

<sup>4</sup> Gyanendra Pandey in *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India*: "It was in March 1940 that the Muslim League formally proposed the establishment of separate states for the Muslim majority regions of north-western and north-eastern India; and as late as September 1944, in his correspondence with Gandhi, and April 1946, in a meeting of all Muslim League legislators of the center and the provinces, Jinnah and the Muslim League were still having to clarify that the proposal was for *one* sovereign, independent state called Pakistan (with its separate, eastern and western wing)." (Pandey, pp. 21-22)

<sup>5</sup> Shanta, Lenny's ayah is played by Nandita Das.

<sup>6</sup> Lenny's mother played by Kitu Gidwani.

<sup>7</sup> Hassan, the Maalishwala, played by Rahul Khanna.

<sup>8</sup> Dil Nawaz or Ice candywala played by Amir Khan.

<sup>9</sup> Gyanendra Pandey in *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India*: "It was in March 1940 that the Muslim League formally proposed the establishment of separate states for the Muslim majority regions of north-western and north-eastern India; and as late as September 1944, in his correspondence with Gandhi, and April 1946, in a meeting of all Muslim League legislators of the center and the provinces, Jinnah and the Muslim League were still having to clarify that the proposal was for *one* sovereign, independent state called Pakistan (with its separate, eastern and western wing)." (Pandey, pp. 21-22)

<sup>10</sup> Kavita Daiya in *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India* can be quoted: "Moreover, the film's representation of the migration and Partition refugees is static and problematic: The refugees on *Earth* remain anonymous, faceless masses. They merely form the backdrop to the epic failure of Hindu-Muslim romance at the hands of violent Muslim masculinities." (Daiya, p. 61)

<sup>11</sup> 'Giri hui aurat' is tarnalsted as a befallen woman.



<sup>12</sup> Sikata Banerjee in the article “Gender and Nationalism: The Masculinization of Hinduism and Female Political Participation in India” elucidates this point: “Women symbolize national honor, thus any act (eg. Rape) that defiles and violates women’s bodies become a political weapon aimed at destroying the enemy’s national honor. (Banerjee, p. 168)

<sup>13</sup> Hari played by Raghuveer Yadav.

<sup>14</sup> Kavita Daiya in her text *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender and National Culture in Postcolonial India* can be quoted as: “*Earth* reproduces the dominant, nationalist construction of women’s abduction by violent Muslim masculinities as the final and ultimate moment of horror and unintelligibility, Ayah’s abduction becomes a spectacle not only for Lenny and the Sethi family but also for the film's spectator subject. Ayah as the raped woman disappears from the horizon of national history in this film after sexual violence; her abduction and implied rape in this nationalist discourse mark her death as a social subject, a citizen, and an agent.” (Daiya, p. 62)

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