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“The scent of one’s own country”: The Partition of India as the Unprocessed Cultural Trauma in Shyam Benegal’s *Mammo*

Abstract. The article examines the way in which the historical event of the Partition of India on the 15th of August, 1947 influenced the shaping and later development of trauma within Indian culture. In order to conduct this analysis, the article firstly concentrates on the history behind the Partition event by providing information about the division of India. Then, the notion of cultural trauma and its location within the Indian context is outlined. Next, the reflections of the Partition of India within the domain of cinema are presented. Finally, the article focuses on the impact of cultural trauma on Indian society on the basis of a cinematic text entitled *Mammo* (1994). The motion picture is analyzed in three parts, answering the following questions: how is the event presented in the film?; what is the main heroine’s attitude and possible connection with the event?; how is the vision of independent India re-examined in *Mammo* 30 years after its transformation? The analysis aims to show that the historical event of the Partition of India had a significant impact on the people of India as well as Indian culture.

Keywords: cultural trauma; Indian cinema; *Mammo*; the Partition of India; post-colonialism; Shyam Benegal.

Introduction

The Partition of India may be contemporarily viewed as the event of great historic significance. First of all, it led to the dissolution of British India and, secondly, to the establishment of independence in a long-occupied colony. However, the Partition is also an exemplary case of the difficult process that one nation had to undergo in order to achieve independence. Considering the handover of the colonial rule and its disastrous consequences for the communities of different religious and cultural backgrounds, it is visible that the process of division still continues to haunt the people of India, especially in neo-colonial terms. In addition, this transformation was so influential that it initiated the creation of numerous works of fiction and non-fiction documenting various perspectives on the historical event. Consequently, it is still a very significant cultural subject, which constantly summons new representations within the domains of literature and cinema. The aim of these representations is to evaluate disparate aspects of the event as well as provide the means for the audience to face the trauma which permanently altered the personality and memory of those who experienced it (Alexander et al. 2004: 1). The main objective of this article is to analyze the impact of this cultural trauma on Indian society on the basis of the film *Mammo* (1994), directed by Shyam Benegal.

Before proceeding to the full analysis of the motion picture, it can be helpful to briefly explain what exactly the Partition of India was. Undoubtedly, the event can be regarded both as a liberation of India as well as a symbolic dawn of the colonial era in general. To be more specific, due to the continuous struggle of Mahatma Gandhi's civil-disobedience movement, the activities of the Indian National Congress and other political/social groups, Viceroy Louis Mountbatten finally granted independence to India. Yet, due to the controversies about who will be ruling the country after the handover of power, the concept of creating a separate land for Muslims, known as Pakistan, was put forward¹. Consequently, British India was divided along the lines where specific religious communities constituted a majority. Nearly 14 million people found out that the newly created borderlines left

¹ The case of Pakistan may be elaborated upon even further, because Jinnah's conflict with Gandhi and Nehru "pushed the Muslims to proceed with the campaign urging the British to divide the Indian subcontinent" (Harenda 2017: 128). In addition, the word itself, Pakistan (literally Land of the Pure) is "a clever composition of the letters taken from the names of respectively, Punjab, Afghanistan, Sindh, and Balochistan, thus designed in order to evoke a nationalistic feeling among the Muslims" (Harenda 2017: 129).

them in the “wrong” country, which forced them to leave their homes and journey to “new” homelands (Das 2009: 276-277). According to statistics, approximately 500,000 people died in the process of migration and millions more were injured due to the multiple acts of violence and retaliation in the provinces across which the boundaries were established (Lapierre and Collins 1992: 183–186).

With regard to the concept of cultural trauma and the case of India, undeniably, the Partition was a tragic event in itself due to massive ethnic killings, slaughter, and assaults on trains. However, the process of narrating and attributing significance to the event (Alexander et al. 2004: 6–7) took place with a considerable delay. It was in the 1950s that the survivors started writing their personal memoirs, which focused on the atrocities. Later, these memoirs started to be fictionalized by writers, and thus the foundations were laid for the so-called “Partition narratives” (Dube 2015: 77). It can be inferred that it was through the creation of cultural texts that the survivors of the Partition were able to finally confront their traumatic experiences as well as provide an emotional release for their haunting memories (Alexander et al. 2004: 5).

With the fall of colonialism, the people of India were finally able to freely express themselves through the means of art, including cinema. In terms of cinematic texts focusing on the Partition of India, these were present as early as the 1950s; nevertheless, they never addressed their subject matter directly. Indian filmmakers wanted to avoid depicting the violence of the event and therefore the Partition functioned as unreferenced background rather than foreground topic for the film plots. As a result, early motion pictures² centred on the daily lives and hardships of the uprooted refugees through the motifs of homelessness, amnesia, or lost siblings (Dube 2015: 73). *Scorching Winds* (1973)³ was the first Indian film to openly address the issues of the Partition. Interestingly, due to its taboo topic, it became regarded as highly controversial in the India of the 1970s (Kinsey 2013). *Scorching Winds* paved the way for other successful motion pictures about the Partition, such as the adaptation of *Train to Pakistan*, Deepa Mehta’s *Earth*, and Shyam Benegal’s *Mammo*.

² For instance, Ritwik Ghatak’s films: *The Cloud-Capped Star* (1960), *E-Flat* (1961), *Subarnarekha* (1965).

³ It tells the story of a Muslim family and their struggle to survive in post-partition India (Kinsey 2012).

Mammo (1994)

Mammo is a 1994 production directed by an acclaimed director Shyam Benegal, a co-creator of a genre known as “parallel cinema” in India (<https://www.britannica.com>) whose aim is to counteract the mainstream Bollywood productions with films using the naturalistic style and examining real-life issues as well as socio-political contexts. *Mammo* is a representative example of this cinematic mode as it not only focuses on the Partition of India, but also the situation of Indian women, constituting in this manner the first entry in the socially-centred *Muslim Trilogy*⁴. The script for the film was written by a journalist Khalid Mohamed inspired by the testimonies of his own grandparents, who survived the Partition (Mohamed 2014). Interestingly, the main heroine of the picture was played by Farida Jalal—a veteran Bollywood actress already at that time⁵.

Mammo tells the story of an Indian family living on the outskirts of Mumbai in the 1970s. The viewers are presented with the figures of Riyaz, a 13-year-old orphan, and his grandmother Fejji, who does not really know how to establish a thread of communication with her rebellious and outspoken grandson, until one day somebody unexpectedly knocks on their door. It turns out to be Mammo, Fejji’s long gone sister, who moved with her husband to Pakistan after the Partition and now, thirty years later, has decided to return to her homeland. Unfortunately, she has no money and is allowed to stay in the country on a temporary visa only. Riyaz does not suspect that the arrival of an unknown relative will completely turn his life upside down. The great-aunt is a rather extrovert person with a strong tendency to utter words in a very loud and quick manner. She not only embarrasses Riyaz in front of his school friends, but constantly greets complete strangers as well as pries into Fejji’s personal affairs. Needless to say, such an annoying relative, disrupting the stillness of daily life, becomes quite a burden for the grandson. Nevertheless, Mammo is the only person able to reach out to a young boy suffering from the loss of his parents and, within a period of only a few months, she becomes a parental figure to him.

⁴ A set of films: *Mammo* (1994), *Sardari Begum* (1996), and *Zubeidaa* (2001), which focus on the individual members of the same family (<http://www.imdb.com>).

⁵ She played supporting roles in such Indian cinematic classics as *Aradhana* (1968), *Bobby* (1973), and later appeared in Bollywood mainstream hits like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Something is Happening* (1998), and *Happiness & Tears* (2001) (<http://www.imdb.com>).

Interestingly, the movie opens with a fast-paced, 30-second-long compilation of cut scenes which serve as a way of foreshadowing how tragic the following story is going to be. What is more, immediately after the opening credits, the whole compilation is revealed to have been a dream of an adult Riyaz, living in modern-day India (the year 1994) still with his elderly grandmother Fejji. We can see him waking up abruptly and immediately sitting in front of his typewriter, on which he writes the following: “Her Shawl, Her Burqa, Her Bonnet—The night was flying through the window; the Frontier Mall sped into the velvety darkness. Mehmooda Begum abbreviated Mammo. . . ” (0:03:06–0:03:12). Next, he engages in a conversation with Fejji, telling her about the dream and asking where Mammo Nani would be now. “Who knows if she is alive?. . . I wish we had done more to keep her with us” (0:03:44–0:04:10), the grandmother replies and it is at that point that the recollection of Mammo’s life begins.

The Image of the Partition in *Mammo*

Exactly halfway through the movie, Mammo presents her account of the Partition. It should be noted that this particular image is not produced entirely in a visual manner, but predominantly through the heroine’s words. It stands to represent countless oral testimonies which challenged the official nationalist accounts of acquiring independence by regarding independence and the Partition as interwoven and inseparable concepts: namely, liberty marked with bloodshed (Dube 2015: 68–69). This confronting quality of testimonies is exemplified in the scene when walking together back home, the grandson reveals that he would like to become a writer and simply write about life itself: “So you want to write like Manto. He too wrote about what he observed” (1:08:53–1:08:56), says Mammo making in this way a reference to Saadat Hasan Manto, the first writer of testimonies on the atrocities of the Partition (Kumar 1999: 213). Soon after stating this, the great-aunt goes on to add that “There are many things in life that it is better not to experience. Like experiencing hell” (1:09:04–1:09:13), and she delivers the following monologue:

Ahmedbhai [Mammo’s husband] and I . . . left everything in the dead of night carrying only what we had in our pockets and hands and journeyed towards Pakistan. Along with other refugees, we were taken in trucks to the border from there, we walked. What bad times they were. Suffering. Fire. Blood. Looting. Screams of the

dying. There were around 500 of us. While we were crossing over from this side just as many were coming across from the other. From this side, the people were Muslims. From that side, Hindus and Sikhs. But both sides went through the same trauma. Abandoning their homes, property, loved ones. There was a woman walking along with me. She had two small children. They were in her arms. One died while in her arms. Where was the time for any burial? When we came to a river people told her to . . . dispose of the dead body in its waters. The poor woman was not in her senses. She threw the live baby into the river. And held the dead child strapped to her breast. Her worn and weary eyes are still before me . . . and her shriek . . . (1:09:24–1:11:14)

The whole trauma of the Partition is reflected only in this one scene of the entire film. However, the filmmakers do not provide any *artistic* flashbacks or some tear-jerking, incidental music; in fact, the heroine's speech is cross-cut with two short and very blurred sequences of people running through the night. The viewers are only able to see their silhouettes, but it is more than enough to picture the rest of the frightening image that Mammo describes in detail. On the basis of this testimony, we can notice a number of references to the history of the handover of power. Namely, Mammo says that she and her husband "left everything in the dead of night," thus they must have travelled sometime around the date of the independence if not at exactly the very night from the 14th to the 15th of August, because she also mentions large masses of other migrants as well as "fire, blood, looting, screams of the dying." In addition, Mammo's remark: "From this side, the people were Muslims. From that side, Hindus and Sikhs," provides a direct reference to the groups of citizens of suddenly divided Punjab. In contrast, the dreadful story about a woman and her children exemplifies a drop in the ocean of thousands of various personal tragedies that the people of India had endured during that desperate period. Consequently, Mammo's description provides evidence to suggest that the trauma of the Partition was constructed collectively and the event's atrocities irreversibly changed the memory and identity of the victims (Alexander et al. 2004: 1–2, 4).

In addition to this, as observed by the researcher Priya Kumar, the whole act of Mammo providing her spoken testimony can be viewed in terms of double witnessing. Mammo experienced the horrors of the Partition directly and by telling them to Riyaz, she passes on the trauma conveyed in those memories to him, a representative of a new generation. In consequence, Riyaz becomes Mammo's witness, transforming the film's narrative into the testimony of his adult-self on the typewriter (1999: 212–213).

Mammo as the Embodiment of the Partition

In order to properly understand the image of the Partition presented in the motion picture, the primary focus should be devoted to its main heroine: who exactly is Mammo and what is her relationship with India? At first her true nature appears ambiguous, yet as the story unfolds, Mammo’s past is finally revealed in a step by step fashion, through a series of various conversations between Mammo and other characters.

The first piece of information in which the audience learn about Mammo is that she has been separated from her relatives in India for 30 years. In one of numerous letters to her sister, she pleads Fejji to let her come over to Mumbai and move into their small household: “Since Ahmedbhai died I have no-one to call my own. I am totally alone. I wish to come to you. Rest assured, I won’t bother you. I will cook for you. Sweep and swab for you . . . Please send for me” (0:05:26–0:05:51). Nonetheless, Fejji is reluctant to do so, since she barely manages to maintain her middle-class lifestyle, not mentioning the grandson she has to take care of. Yet, Mammo, desperate to leave Pakistan, arrives at their doorstep on her own. From the initial heart-to-heart talk between the sisters, Mammo presents us with some crucial information about her previous whereabouts. Namely, during her stay in Pakistan, and especially after the death of her husband, she has been constantly harassed by her in-laws. Mammo confesses that she was turned into a servant, she was humiliated on a daily basis as well as physically abused. After not receiving help even from the Pakistani police, which claimed that family quarrels should be settled at home, she decided to flee to India. The involuntary repatriate also goes on to add that the primary cause for her in-laws’ hatred towards her was because Ahmedbhai married Mammo against his family’s wishes and she never bore them any children. In this manner, the victimized widow constitutes a prime example of the oppressed Indian woman, a person harassed by her husband’s relatives who treated her as a commodity.

Additionally, the issue of religious affiliation can be of essential importance when trying to understand Mammo’s decision to become married and “quit” India in pursuit of a new life with her husband. That is to say, Mammo is the only practicing Muslim in the film. It is never revealed whether Fejji or Riyaz are indeed Muslims, because they do not engage in any religious practices. Nevertheless, Ahmedbhai certainly was a Muslim and it was this religious allegiance that encouraged him and Mammo to participate in the migration flow of 1947. Moreover, regardless of whether

she was raised in a Muslim family or not, upon her marriage, Mammo wholeheartedly embraces the doctrines of Islam, becoming a passionate believer. When Riyaz wakes up after the first day of her arrival, he sees her praying out in the living room and chanting the following:

God, you are benevolent. You are merciful. You pardon all our sins. Lord, may my late husband's soul rest in peace. God, please punish those wicked people. Who tormented me and rendered me homeless I thank you a million times over for bringing me together with my sister and family. . . . Protect them from misfortune and safeguard me. (0:14:55–0:15:34)

In addition to this, Mammo takes up teaching the Quran to Muslim children from the neighbourhood as a way of earning some extra money. Therefore, it appears quite clear that for such a devout follower as Mammo there is no place in post-Partition India to live safely and freely practice her beliefs.

With regard to Mammo's nationalistic attitude, we can observe throughout the film that the heroine seems constantly anchored to the past. Mammo conjures up the ghosts of her childhood when looking at Fejji's old photographs and recollecting great Indian singers and actors of the 1940s. Yet, at the same time she praises the wonders of her other home, Lahore. When walking with Riyaz to the police station in order to extend her visa, she remarks at the sight of the devastated streets of Mumbai: "Had you seen Lahore! Such wide roads, bungalows, green trees. Imported cars going zip-zip" (0:17:13–0:17:24). Riyaz in turn expresses his doubt: since it was so wonderful, he cannot understand why she has come here, to which Mammo replies: "You get to be older and you'll understand . . . that the scent of one's own country is something wonderful" (0:17:34–0:17:41).

Nevertheless, as much as this sentimental statement proves Mammo's emotional attachment to India, according to Benedict Anderson, it also exposes the artificial aspect of national cohesion (1991: 6). As the researcher outlines in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, nations perceive themselves as a community (Anderson 1991: 6–7)⁶; in other words, all citizens have an imaginary sense of belonging to a common group, but Mammo counteracts this notion: firstly, because she is

⁶ This approach is also endorsed by Jeffrey C. Alexander, who claimed that Anderson's "imagined communities" are "the kinds of self-consciously ideological narratives of nationalist history"; or specifically, "collective beliefs [which] assert the existence of some national trauma" (2004: 8).

a Muslim who cherishes India, not Pakistan (whereas in terms of nationalistic ideology, it should be the other way round); secondly, because she does not have any feelings of hatred or intolerance towards the members of other religious groups. For instance, she engages into an amiable chat with a Sikh woman at the police station, additionally, she cleverly deduces from a taxi driver’s accent that he is a Hindu from the United Provinces, and takes a stand in defence of a Dalit servant against her abusive husband. Therefore, Mammo is not a person struggling to single out her distinct feelings on Indian sovereignty, as opposed to the Indian political groups, but rather she is above religious and caste divisions. She transposes her view of India from the past on the present, that “scent of one’s own country”. According to her, India should retain its status from the pre-colonial times and remain a subcontinent of nationalities, a heterogeneous country not relying on artificial propaganda but on reality as it is.

India of the 1970s as the Aftermath of the Partition

Apart from the aforementioned issues, the makers of the film present us with a vision of India 30 years after its transformation and question the truthfulness of this image. Perhaps the most ironic issue is conveyed in a scene at Riyaz’s school. The grandson meets up with his schoolmates and starts encouraging them to skip a history class and go to the local cinema instead. “Kazi is going to revise 1857 today” (0:22:54–00:22:56), says one of the friends and the other emphasizes that Riyaz should forget about cinema, because they “have” to do 1857, that is, learn about the first anti-colonial call to arms, the Sepoy Rebellion. Nevertheless, Riyaz replies: “You can’t forego the first freedom war for Hitchcock?” (0:23:07–0:23:10). In consequence, instead of learning about the process of Indian liberation, he prefers to sit back in the theatre and watch *Psycho* (1960). In this manner, Riyaz regrettably represents the new generation of independent Indians, people consumed by fascination with the West, indifferent to the past.

Moreover, also with regard to cinema, Riyaz is eventually caught by Mammo watching those despicable adult films and the woman comes up with the idea to go with him to see some domestic production. Consequently, they together watch the aforementioned *Scorching Winds* (1973), which functions as an intertextual reference to the first major motion picture about the Partition. Specifically, we can see Mammo, Riyaz, and Fejji watching the scene of Salim’s mother being brought back to their old household, so she could die in peace there. “Dear God it looks like my own story has been

made into this film!” (1:13:05–1:13:09), exclaims Mammo upon seeing the death of a woman who loved India. Interestingly, as Pankurhee Dube accurately notices in her essay about this act of spectatorship, such cinematic narratives gave the victims of the Partition the ability to face once again the unspeakable trauma of the event and identify their tragedies with the tragedies of the characters on screen, which is exemplified by Mammo (2015: 72–73).

Furthermore, Mammo finds herself in the opposition against the greatly expanded Indian administration system. The 1970s were the heyday of Indira Gandhi’s rule as the Prime Minister⁷; however, the administrative authorities on all levels thrived on corruption at that time.⁸ Evidently, Mammo is also the person who reluctantly takes part in this practice in order not to be deported back to Pakistan. When her visa is about to expire, a Police Registration Officer subtly hints to Mammo that “her papers can vanish” (1:41:22–1:41:23) in exchange for certain “goods” (1:41:26). Hence, Mammo gives over 5000 rupees to the officer and is led to believe that she may stay in India permanently, but it is a false assurance. Unfortunately, the corruptible officer is soon transferred and deportation officials are pounding on Fejji’s door so as to take Mammo away. They literally storm into the house and forcefully escort the defenceless woman to the railway station. Riyaz comes back home shortly after and, shocked to see what has happened, rushes there as well. Mammo, without any luggage whatsoever, is put on the first train to Pakistan. “Why cry? You are returning to your home” (1:52:01–1:52:04), says one of the female social workers arrogantly upon seeing Mammo in tears, but the woman exclaims: “My home is here! I want to be buried here!” (1:52:05–1:52:09). Just as the train leaves the station, young Riyaz arrives and, frantically searching through carriage windows, he finally finds his great-aunt, yet the two are only able to touch hands. Once again in her life, the heroine experiences the Partition.

The concluding scene of the movie provides an emphasis on the disastrous outcomes of the Partition. We see the adult Riyaz typing at his desk that for 20 years he has been trying to find Mehmooda Begum Ali in Pakistan, yet without any success. When he is about to fulfil his act of witnessing by writing “who knows if she is alive or...” (1:54:07–1:54:10), all of a sudden, he hears someone knocking on the door. “Child, why are you staring? Pick up my luggage” (1:54:29–1:54:35), says an elderly Mammo at the doorstep.

⁷ The direct cause of this was winning the Indo Pakistani war of 1971.

⁸ This still continues to be a major problem of contemporary India. In 2016, the Government of India made an effort to counteract corruption by demonetisation of ₹500 and ₹1,000 banknotes (<https://en.wikipedia.org>).

The woman survived the hardship of banishment and returned once more to her close ones in her beloved India, only this time for good. She faked her death certificate, so the immigration authorities would not search for her. Paradoxically, by becoming her own ghost, Mammo successfully manages to defy the state authority as well as correctly process her trauma. It is the rejection of Indian nationalism and survival of an individual that is praised in the film (Kumar 1999: 214). “I am now a genie. Only those with a magic lamp will be able to see me!” (1:57:17–1:57:25), Mammo triumphantly exclaims while embracing her sister and grandson. The circle has become complete: the repatriate returned home.

Conclusion

On the basis of the presented material, we can conclude that Shyam Benegal’s *Mammo* (1994) provides an insightful evaluation of cultural trauma within the Indian historical context. Through the idiosyncratic character of Mammo Mehmooda Begum Ali, a strong relation with her grandson, and her standing up against the authorities, the condition of an individual set against the backdrop of historical turmoil is outlined. Additionally, the movie examines a generational gap between people as well as the state of modern India, questioning its nationalist nature and exposing its political degeneracy.

In contrast with the fact that a substantial quantity of other cultural representations focused on the Partition in a direct manner (positioning the stories specifically at the time the event took place), *Mammo* provides a distanced perspective, becoming in this way an intimate reckoning with eerie memories, the oral narrative which is textualized by the grandson (Riyaz/Khalid Mohamed) and eventually visualized for the viewers in the form of the film. As a result, the act of trauma processing, or facing with the ghosts of the past, becomes a collective activity. This highly psychoanalytic approach is reinforced by Alexander who writes that: “Trauma will be resolved, not only by setting things right in the world, but by setting things right in the self” (2004: 5). All things considered, the Partition of India indeed had a significant impact on the inhabitants of India and its haunting within Indian culture is visible even nowadays.

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