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“This is our Holocaust”: Deepa Mehta’s *Earth* and the Question of Partition Trauma

By Dorothy Barenscott

Whose experience was it that was *really* unique?

I think that such an approach is unfortunate. You should try to understand various phenomena, both in their own specificity and in ways whose conceptualization may enable you to better understand, and come to terms with constructively, other phenomena.

--Dominik LaCapra, *The Uniqueness of the Holocaust and the Proper Name*

It is the force of a crisis that operates functional displacements in discursive fields.

--Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography*

India’s Partition history is apparently haunted, at some level, by the Holocaust in Europe. This is especially true in the consideration of the contested nature of the Partition. Unsurprisingly, scholars located in, and educated by, Western institutions of learning produce some of the most radical re-examinations of India’s Partition history and crucial assessments of historical narratives associated with this traumatic event. To be sure, the globalization of academic discourse, and in particular, the Subaltern Studies Project, increasingly produces assessments that have a direct and theoretically informed connection to both the European Holocaust and the Partition. As a result, witnessing, memory, national, and personal histories characterize a new direction in Partition historiography. For example, Sukeshi Karma’s book *Bearing Witness: Partition, Independence, End of the Raj* (2002), is a recent and relevant work, whose very title echoes recent studies of Holocaust narratives, such as Hazel Rochman’s *Bearing witness : Stories of the Holocaust* (1995), or Henry Feinglod’s *Bearing witness : How America and its Jews Responded to the Holocaust* (1995). Turning to cinema, a medium that Ann Kaplan argues, given modernity’s impact, *is trauma*, its attendant arms of film theory, and film criticism, a similar situation emerges. It is in the site of cinema where the language of violence on the scale seen during India’s Partition, particularly when represented visually, will bear some burden of comparison to the ‘greatest of all human tragedies.’

The specter of the Holocaust pulls Deepa Mehta’s film *Earth* (1999) and the topic of India’s Partition into the nexus of specific debates surrounding the limits of representation with respect to violence and the body. Set in Lahore during the summer of 1947, *Earth* explores how the peaceful existence

of one group of Hindu, Sikh, Parsee, and Muslim friends is shattered with the impending partition of India. Based largely on an autobiographical account, Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* (1991), the events of the film are presented through the eyes of Lenny, an eight-year-old child, as she attempts to comprehend the violence and hardship that her family endures as Partition unfolds. In particular, Lenny fears the worst for her beloved nanny Shanta, a Hindu woman, who has become romantically involved with Lenny's hero and family friend, a local Muslim masseur named Hasan. Against the backdrop of the forbidden love affair, the viewer is plunged into the film's climatic ending which results in the murder of Hasan and the inferred brutal rape of Shanta.

For a number of reasons that this essay will outline, *Earth* has been described and critiqued within the context of the loaded signifier "Holocaust", subjecting what several critics have termed "India's *Schindler's List*" to a similar polarity in reception witnessed by Western films of the Jewish Holocaust.¹ In turn, the history and memory of events particular to India and represented in *Earth* appear to position Deepa Mehta and her film within the nomenclature—a system of words used in a particular discipline—of a distinctly Western preoccupation with, and experience of, trauma, history, and memory. Mehta, who appears to intentionally draw on the potent visual vocabulary of Holocaust films, has been quoted often as saying that, "The partition of India was a Holocaust for us...it was our Holocaust."² While Mehta's alignment of his film about the Partition with the European Holocaust might appear as a problematic and failed outcome of his attempt to gain global recognition of a rarely discussed aspect of a specifically Indian moment in history, these assertions warrant closer examination of their implications, outcomes, production of meanings, and theoretical potential of *Earth's* visual and hermeneutic engagement with the unfolding signification of the discourses of Holocaust trauma.

My point of departure is Gyanendra Pandey's influential 2001 volume, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, in which he analyses the remembering, forgetting, and representation of Partition.³ Pandey argues at the outset that Partition historiography has been interested "in justifying or eliding, what is seen in the main as being an illegitimate outbreak of violence" — simply stated, not *our* history — and explaining how

¹ Several popular film review sites on the Internet have used this kind of language in their reviews of *Earth*. See for example Mary Ann Johanson's Flickphilosopher.com review: <http://www.flickphilosopher.com/flickfilos/archive/3q99/earth.html>.

² See Richard Phillips, "Interview with Deepa Mehta," World Socialist Website, 6 August 1999; <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/aug1999/meh-a06.shtml>.

³ Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

this violence contradicts Indian or Pakistani traditions and understandings of their respective national histories.⁴ What is significant about Pandey is his call for the reconception of Partition as a moment of “rupture,” sharing the political and psychic outcome of other twentieth-century decolonizations, especially with respect to the character of violence witnessed (i.e. the killing, rape, arson, and vandalism that accompanied these events). Arguing that the discipline of history works from the idea of a fixed subject, Pandey is most interested in revealing how violence, as a *language*, constitutes and reconstitutes the subject and breaks across both Indian *and* Pakistani entities. More specifically, Pandey suggests that a language that is shared among a number of subjects can be recuperated, and that moments of struggle can also be written back into history, while simultaneously describing the near impossibility of the enterprise. In other words, historians are called to reveal how different and varied the Partition looks and is experienced from various perspectives, conveying the enormity of the event. This is especially pressing for today’s historians, as the resurgence of ethnic nationalism within India demands a careful reexamination of Partition and its representation.

Indeed, it is precisely because of the high emotional and national stakes involved in the remembering and retelling of India’s Partition that Partition historiography has occupied an uncertain and volatile place within the narratives of both an Indian and Pakistani past. A cursory glance at the diverse outpouring of academic scholarship on Partition, especially since the mid-1980s, reveals that attempts to revisit and recapture this potent and complex moment of violence remain highly divided and isolated along disciplinary, national, and theoretical boundaries.⁵ In other words, the works appear as either histories

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3. It is of course important to reiterate the salient differences of the Jewish Holocaust and Indian Partition in regards to the transformation of national identities through the violence. However, the idea of disavowing certain aspects of the actual events to a national history is central in both cases.

⁵ For the most recent discussion of Partition historiography, see Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes and Rada Ivekovic, *Divided Countries, Separated Cities: The Modern Legacy of Partition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), and for a comprehensive overview of Partition historiography and bibliography of the pertinent literature, see David Gilmartin, “Partition, Pakistan, and South Asian History: In Search of a Narrative” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57.4 (1998): 1068-1095. See also Ayesha Jalal, “Secularists, subalterns and the stigma of ‘communalism’: Partition historiography revisited” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 33.1 (1996): 93-103; and what is discussed by both Gilmartin and Jalal as the earliest essay dealing with the theoretical dynamics of Partition historiography, Gyanendra Pandey’s “The Prose of Otherness” in *Subaltern Studies VIII: Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha*, edited by David Arnold and David Hardiman (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994) 188-221.

of the 'high politics' of Partition or first-hand accounts that attempt to come to terms with the everyday experience of those who lived through the historical moments of 1947. While the past two decades have seen a new generation of scholars attempt to incorporate fiction and autobiographical accounts into the broader history of the political negotiations between the British, the Congress, and the Muslim League that led to the creation of Pakistan, there are often gaps and disconnections remaining in the co-mingled of narratives. As David Gilmartin observes in his overview of Partition historiography, "the violence of partition itself has resisted effective integration with the political narrative of partition's causes."⁶ Pandey, in an earlier work on Partition, locates these and other key limitations of Partition historiography within a broader framework of colonialist and nationalist historical writing. He argues that the history and marginalization of "perhaps the single most important event in the twentieth century," is assimilated to "the career of the Indian nation-state or, alternatively, to the story of the British Empire in India."⁷ One consequence, as Ayesha Jalal argues in an equally telling assessment of recent Partition writings, is the continued practice of scholarly reading and critiquing along national lines. Even non-partisan scholarship "rarely escapes being labeled 'made in India' or 'made in Pakistan.'"⁸

Recent partition literature provides a way out of the predicament of Partition in Indian historiography, particularly in those writings that attempt to come to terms with and construct meanings out of the aftermath of Partition violence and trauma. This scholarship focusing on the resettlement of refugees, the recovery of abducted and raped women, and the complexities of familial and communal relationships in the wake of Partition draws on the powerful anthologies of Partition stories as inspiration. In turn, the new literature provides a means

⁶ Gilmartin, 1069.

⁷ Pandey, "Prose of Otherness" 204.

⁸ Jalal, 93. Importantly, Jalal includes a critical discussion of Pandey's work within the context of Subaltern Studies in her own overview. And while Jalal writes that "Pandey must be commended for noticing, even if somewhat belatedly, the 'paradoxical position' that the question of partition occupies in Indian historiography," she also points out, revealing the thrust of her overall argument that even the most seemingly non-partisan assessments can not go depoliticized, that "One pre-eminent school of historiography that escapes his close attention is the 'subaltern collective'. Considering that the subaltern school has been in the publication business for more than a decade, one wonders what might explain its long silence on the history of partition. Could it be that its project too was largely framed around the question of the failure of 'nation' to come into its own, making it a trifle awkward to recognize the subjecthood of the 'Muslim Other'?" Jalal's observations remain critical to an understanding of how fraught and problematic the reception of Subaltern Studies remains in the minds of some South Asian historians.

through which to address issues of gender, class, and ethnicity that moves Partition histories closer to bodily and lived experience, while simultaneously contending with the challenge of integrating a “history from below” with the power politics of nation states.⁹ Moreover, as Gilmartin suggests, there is a manner in which these narratives alter the dynamics of remembering:

In the best of these works, the tensions between the experiences of individuals, and the attempts of the new states to give national meaning to the events of Partition (by attempting to restore a patriarchal moral order in their wake) have helped to define the contours of a *narrative of memory* about partition.¹⁰

As a result, the promise of the latest turn in Partition historiography is a return to the body and creation of a spatial vocabulary that challenges the production of discrete nationalist histories while exploring the very limits of historical representation.

An important element of Pandey’s work that I wish to underscore is his call for an examination of the disciplining of difference within the construction of national histories, especially the histories written within the multiethnic and multicultural make-up of the Indian subcontinent. He calls for a close study of the varied and diverse experiences of Partition and first-person accounts, and he places particular emphasis on the sharing of these findings on a broad public scale. Pandey conceives of this public on the scale of an expanding global discourse on the overall processes involved in the production of history. Notably, Pandey argues that Pierre Nora and other Western historians have set forth ideas about history and memory that confine history to narrow spaces of academic production. Pandey envisions a methodology that integrates or co-mingles histories across national boundaries as

⁹ Pandey and Gilmartin both cite Alok Bhalla’s edited book, *Stories About the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Indus, 1994). David Gilmartin includes a number of these works in his bibliography, including: Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Gyanesha Khudaisya, “The Demographic Upheaval of Partition: Refugees and Agricultural Resettlement in India, 1946-47” *South Asia* 18 Special Issue (1995): 57-72; Andrew Major, “‘The Chief Sufferers’: Abduction of Women During the Partition of Punjab” *South Asia* 18 Special Issue (1995): 57-72; Urvashi Butalia, “Community, State and Gender: On Women’s Agency During Partition” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28.17 (1993): 13-24. I would also include a number of works since Gilmartin’s 1998 essay that signal a turn towards a more direct engagement with memory and trauma, including: Sukeshi Karma, *Bearing Witness: Partition, Independence, End of the Raj* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002); Suvir Kaul, *Partitions of Memory: Afterlife of the Division of India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); Alex Tickell, “‘How Many Pakistans? Questions of Space and Identity in the Writings of Partition” *Ariel* 32.3 (2001): 155-179.

¹⁰ Gilmartin, 1069 (emphasis mine).

a way to locate the sites of difference and convergence in an interactive and truly global conceptualization of the production and representation of the past—popular, academic, and otherwise. Pandey writes:

Could one say, more specifically, that it is in the unrecorded, or at least, unintegrated histories of other traditions and practices—that we shall find much of the specificity, and diversity, of our lives and times, of our nation-states, of our capitalist economies and our modern institutions? Perhaps it is precisely in the ambivalences that we shall find the particular violence of our histories.¹¹

Importantly, Pandey seems to suggest that something of the original term ‘holocaust’ can be recaptured, reshaped, and reappropriated by Partition history to move the terms of discussion in new directions. In this context dynamically renews the term “holocaust”, making the debates surrounding it more complex:

In the lower case, for which the *Random House Dictionary* (1987) gives as the primary meaning of the term, ‘a great or complete devastation or destruction, esp. by fire’, this is entirely appropriate. Surely, 1947 was all of that. It may, indeed, be seen as having elements of a sacrificial offering rendered up at the birth of two new nations—which is perhaps more in line with the original meaning of holocaust than many other events for which the name has been appropriated. More to the point, the term captures something of the gravity of what happened in the subcontinent at this time that is not usually conveyed in the somewhat mild, and in the Indian context, hackneyed term, ‘partition.’ Posing the question of the adequacy of the latter description may, therefore, lead us to rethink the meaning of that history.¹²

How then are the discourses of Holocaust trauma productive in the context of Pandey’s concerns? First, many of those scholars who are now revisiting the history of Partition did not experience it in a direct and bodily way; therefore, they must rely on secondary accounts and histories from relatives, family, friends, and interview subjects. Current Holocaust study has actively engaged with this ‘problem’ of secondary witnessing (especially since the survivors with direct memories are aging and passing away) and has created infrastructures and models to facilitate retrieval of these narratives. Second, within post-World War II intellectual debate, the Holocaust has become *the* test case for history and memory. As intellectual historian John Toews argues, a number of critical issues punctuate Holocaust studies: “What is at

¹¹ Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

stake in criticism of the processes of historical representation is the discovery of viable, consensual norms for the creation of meaningful individual and cultural identities, the ethics of self-fashioning.”¹³ Representations of the Holocaust exemplify this process in its most “intensely charged form, testing the limits of reconstructing a meaningful relation to the past and thus also of reinventing personally satisfying, socially viable, and ethically defensible subject-positions or identities in the present.”¹⁴ Contemporary Holocaust studies open up a discussion around trauma, history, and forgetting that has been well theorized, broadly debated, and tested across a number of representational modes. Finally, Holocaust studies opens up a broader context for a global discourse on the nature of violence. This is, in part, a result of the mass exodus of Holocaust survivors from Europe in the 1930’s and 40’s, but it is also a consequence of the means through which the narratives of survival, violence and exile were produced and spatialized in the decades following World War II, when they emerged as a chorus of multi-national, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual voices across vast distances and times.

Therefore, the visual vocabulary of Holocaust imagery taken up in *Earth* positions the film within existing debates already made about Holocaust films. Mehta’s film adaptation of one particular Partition story, Bapsi Sidhwa’s 1991 autobiographical novel *Cracking India* shows the benefit of allowing a wider dimension against which to measure the historical moment of India’s Partition. Even more than in the most recent Partition scholarship, this positioning allows for the visual, textual, and spatial emergence of a discussion of contesting identities and subjectivities. The central character of this novel about the violent 1947 partition of India is the extremely observant Lenny Sethi, whose family belongs to the Parsee community in Lahore. As a child, a polio victim, and a member of a minority, Lenny becomes the perfect witness to the historic upheaval. Sidhwa tempers Lenny’s hyper-awareness, however, by capturing the whole range of her fears and joys, as her innocence becomes another casualty of the violence among Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus. This narrative brings to light, more broadly and within the productive infrastructure of a modern technology of seeing, Pandey’s call for a “making of the partitioned subject.” Such a move positions trauma and the visceral account of suffering as a crucial and valid subject of inquiry and discussion. Moreover, this move also troubles simple binaries between memory and history, and pronouncements of the end of the nation and its attendant national history, such as those made by Nora. Ultimately, the theoretical engagement with Holocaust trauma, and the understanding of the Holocaust as a network of human action, moves the

¹³ John E. Toews, “Review of Dominik LaCapra’s *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*” *American Historical Review* (February 1995): 130.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 130

moment of India's Partition and Mehta's work to a position loaded with much higher stake, reinstating ethics and humanity to critical theories of memory, trauma, and violence.

Considerations of India's Partition history and the complexities of particular traumas therefore contributes to, and expands the larger project of, holocaust study *writ large*, which is currently mired in debate over seeing the Holocaust as indicative of all structural trauma or only within the context of its own historical moment (i.e. the universal versus the specific).

Moving to the specific elements of *Earth*, conflicting film reviews are telling in regard to the urgency (and/or possible anxiety) to either dismiss the film as a bad melodrama or see it as a realistic portrayal of what Partition was like, mirroring the kinds of conflicts over representational and narrative modes that Pandey describes in the production of written Partition narratives.¹⁵ On one extreme, there are reviews such as the *New York Post*'s, which praises *Earth*, calling the film, "A remarkable accomplishment. It takes one of the century's vast tragedies...and makes it heart-rendingly real and intimate", and a review in *LA Weekly*, declares the film "both visually and emotionally, a panoramic picture: Mehta wields a master's hand as she weaves together vistas of urban and pastoral India with thoughts on the nature of man as it keeps cycling out in the specifics of history." Yet, at the other extreme, reviews such as those in the *Village Voice* criticize *Earth* as passionately as its supporters, exclaiming that: "right down to its over saturated cinematography: from the lurid reds and purples coloring a tableau of bloodied bodies on a train car, to the warm yellow glow suffusing every household scene, Mehta has made a film at once exploitative and nostalgic."¹⁶

Interestingly, the polarity in reception *Earth* provoked is strikingly similar to the kinds of reviews garnered by Steven Spielberg's Holocaust film *Schindler's List* (1993) a few years earlier. Miriam Bratu Hansen, in an essay examining the discourses of reception around the Hollywood blockbuster and Academy Award winning film, (and especially when compared to Claude Lanzmann's "art" film *Shoah* (1985) on the same topic of the Holocaust), argues that:

The critique of *Schindler's List* in high-modernist terms... reduces the dialectics of the problem of representing the unrepresentable to a binary

¹⁵ I have compiled a cross-selection of *Earth*'s most prominent reviews in Western media from www.metacritic.com. All subsequent reviews I cite can be retrieved from the link to all of *Earth*'s reviews at: <http://www.metacritic.com/video/titles/earth>.

¹⁶ *Village Voice*, September 8 - 14, 1999. http://www.villagevoice.com/film/9936_winter,8155.20.html

opposition of showing or not showing—rather than casting it, as one might, as an issue of competing representations and competing modes of representation. This binary argument also reinscribes, paradoxically, a high-modernist fixation on vision and the visual, whether simply assumed as the epistemological master sense or critically negated as illusory and affirmative. What gets left out is the dimension of the other senses and of sensory experience... and its fate in a history of modernity that encompasses both mass production and mass extermination.¹⁷

Hansen goes on to suggest that, together with a fixation that seeks to reduce the problem of representation to a simple binary, the kinds of critiques generated by Holocaust films fail to move beyond a “high” vs. “low”; “art” vs. “kitsch” assessment. Not unlike Pandey’s own discussion of Partition historiography with its tendency to obfuscate the terms of history writing and the alternative or irretrievable accounts of the past, there is a need to deny the fragmented and ambivalent nature of remembrance, its competing modes of representation, and its implication in existing or future political projects. Moreover, there is a process through which many of these alternative accounts are written off as fiction or ‘bad history’—relegating and marginalizing relevant contributions of Partition experience and remembrance.

Hansen’s argument that visibility and the breaking apart of binaries, and its indirect connections to Pandey’s concerns for the writing of struggle back into history, provides useful insights when approaching Mehta’s film. This is especially so when considering how *Earth* utilizes several filmic conventions similar to *Schindler’s List* and is similarly criticized for taking up the genre of melodrama. Hansen, however, interrogates *Schindler’s List* with an eye to revealing how much more sophisticated, elliptical, and self-reflexive the film is when shifting the terms of debate beyond the stated binaries. Indeed, Mehta’s references to the kinds of conventions employed in the most popular and mass distributed Holocaust films are often more productive, nuanced, and critically provocative than the *Village Voice* critic, or the British film critic who described *Earth* as “a Bollywood influenced confection... that attempts to shock with a catalogue of atrocities.”¹⁸ As Mehta suggests in a 1999 interview, the choice to depict India’s Partition on screen came about as a response to “the silence of the tragedy by western filmmakers.”¹⁹ This, together with

¹⁷ Miriam Bratu Hansen, “*Schindler’s List* Is Not Shoah: Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory,” in *Spielberg’s Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler’s List*, ed. Yosefa Loshitzky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) 85.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, <http://www.metacritic.com/video/titles/earth>.

¹⁹ Richard Phillips, “Interview with Deepa Mehta,” World Socialist Website, 6 August 1999: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/aug1999/meh-a06.shtml>

the recognition that the telling of the story could draw out those aspects of Partition history that moved beyond a deliberately vague and depersonalized identification with India's independence, inspired Mehta to elicit strong universal resonance and engender some sense of empathy with respect to all human suffering through the film. Importantly, Mehta conceived of her film in terms of melodramatic construction, placing domestic settings and familial images within the context of larger social systems exposed in the narrative as corrupt and repressive. As Mehta reveals:

...if you ask anyone from the Punjab today, and we are talking third generation, what does 1947 mean to you, they will never say the independence of India. They all say the partition of India. Every family member has some story to tell. It was a Holocaust."²⁰

Recent critical considerations of melodrama expand its range, relating it directly to trauma, history, and memory. This reexamination of melodrama makes readings of films that represent intense human suffering within the framework of love stories or personal dramas, such as Mehta's *Earth* and Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, more complex. As Kaplan suggests, "Revisiting melodrama from the perspective of trauma theory suggests looking for what the texts cannot know because that knowledge has been displaced."²¹ Indeed, the conventional characterization of a melodrama is as a simple drama of exaggerated emotions, stereotypical characters, and interpersonal conflicts, often with musical accompaniment. Ben Singer, however, in *Melodrama and Modernity* extends the definition around a cluster of variable features including pathos, overwrought emotion, moral polarization, non-classical narrative structure (vignettes), and sensationalism.²² Singer productively describes melodrama in terms of *excess*, triggering and inviting certain visceral and active responses from the spectator such as crying, such as in the 'tearjerker'.

While melodrama has traditionally been employed to forge a sense of belonging, creating clear and fixed counterpoints of good and evil, us and other (seen in post-war Hollywood and Bollywood films for example), the results are decidedly ambiguous and not as clear-cut as the melodrama/realism, 'high vs. low art', dichotomy that is typically constructed. As Singer argues, melodrama "foments psychic energies and emotions which the narrative represses and blocks from full expression, gratification and resolution, because they are fundamentally incompatible with the demands

²⁰ Ibid., <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/aug1999/meh-a06.shtml>

²¹ Kaplan, 74. Kaplan discusses the genealogy of these deviates on pages 70-73.

²² Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 44-48.

of dominant patriarchal ideology.”²³ One consequence is that these energies, like “neurotic symptoms” are diverted and channeled through other forms of expression, especially, Singer observes, in non-naturalistic *mise-en-scene*—conspicuously over saturated colors, sumptuous furnishing, lighting, over-determined props etc. In *Earth*, the lighting and use of color overall creates an aesthetically beautiful film with carefully constructed shots, while abounding in the use of over-determined and ‘too-symbolic’ elements such as the broken plates representing a broken India, Shanta’s wailing sobs as she sews up the doll ripped apart by a traumatized Lenny during the events of Partition, and the story of the ever-adaptive chameleon to reflect the neutral Parsee position in Indian politics.

The melodramatic elements Singer outlines bear a particular relevance to the making of Holocaust films, since these works operate within a process that attempts to represent what is, in effect, beyond full expression or understanding. A number of the elements that manifest themselves in *Earth*, such as the use of music, provocative chiaroscuro lighting, and the use of tight shots, are not surprisingly utilized most heavy-handedly in the staging of those very sequences that call-up or visually reference Holocaust horrors. Two scenes in particular bear closer examination. The first occurs early in the film when Hasan, Lenny’s Muslim friend and her nanny’s lover, watches people begin leaving the city of Lahore in anticipation of Partition. The haunting music and dramatic lighting that casts eerie shadows on the passive, zombie-like individuals, while the cross-cutting between the procession and the silent witness, who is unable to speak, shows him helpless in his observation of events, including the herding of people at night with all of their possessions. Moreover, the image and sound of guards calling people to separate left and right, all recall and visually mimic key scenes and sequences utilized in Holocaust films where Jews and other ‘undesirables’ are rounded up and swiftly deported. The second, arguably more climactic scene, occurs when a train filled with the butchered bodies of Muslims enters the station in Lahore. The train, as modern machinery and transporter of death, arrives as the sounds of screaming witnesses to the travesty overwhelm the musical score set to the scene. From the piled up bodies and their careful and aesthetic arrangement on the train, to the use of color and lighting that draw the eye’s attention to the bodies’ surfaces, and once again the insertion of a dramatic score with a pulsing beat, one cannot help but find similarities to Holocaust films where the train’s impending arrival signals horror and the path towards certain death for its passengers.

I raise these provocative comparisons in an attempt to illustrate how *Earth*, at some level, is engaged with filmic strategies that simultaneously

²³ *Ibid.*, 39.

occur within the conventions of melodrama to signal the excesses of what is being represented, while also employing the use of stereotypically 'Holocaust' sequences to signal the severity of what is being shown. Notably, while these comparisons are also due to the occurrence of events at roughly the same period in the mid-twentieth history, where costumes, industrial and communication technologies (such as the train and radio), and social practices can overlap, these scenes carry even more force because of the doubling up of the episodes of Partition with the filmic vocabulary of the Holocaust. As a result, Mehta is able to posit the specifics of these incidents within the context of those loaded episodes of violence that are most repeated, and hence, most anxiety provoking with regards to the limits of representation. Spatially, these limits are troubled and complicated, perhaps most extensively, through the use of train imagery and references to travel and movement in *Earth*. Whereas in Holocaust films, the one-way movement of peoples by train to concentration camps — a temporary space — elicits a feeling of horror and uncertainty, the reciprocal movement of peoples back and forth across a new Indian-Pakistani border engenders a similar horror, which is compounded by an altered and *irreversible* sense of space, place and time. In this way, the most seemingly banal and abstracted act of partition—the creation of a border—is made to confront the highly dramatic and corporeal reality of lived experience.

One pivotal element of melodrama that deals directly with these issues of anxiety and repetition is the stereotype. In particular, Homi Bhabha's discussion of the stereotype and its consequent modes of representation, discussed in *The Location of Culture*, helps elucidate and extend critical discussion around key elements of *Earth*. Bhabha describes the stereotype as "an ambivalent mode of knowledge and power" and "a major discursive strategy," which animates and contextualizes Singer's more generalized descriptions around melodramas. Importantly, the notion of excess and the attempt to contain certain energies results in what Bhabha describes as "an identification that vacillates between what is always in place, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated."²⁴ Recalling those scenes in *Earth* that appear as stereotypical of Holocaust films, we can see how they too may function to produce that very sense of ambivalence in their incompleteness. Together with a dissatisfaction in the scenes' filmic rendering, and overall sense of lack they impart, the stereotype emerges as a potent discursive strategy of the film.

Bhabha usefully argues that a shift needs to be made from "the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *processes of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse."²⁵ And as Bhabha goes on to add—suggesting to our

²⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge Press, 1994) 66.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

case the specific aspect of India's fraught relationship with the West— only then does it “become possible to understand the *productive* ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse—that ‘otherness’ which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity.”²⁶ In the case of *Earth*, the process of stereotyping takes on something of a reversal or reworking within the context of colonial relations, where Mehta as filmmaker (an individual of ‘hybrid identity’ in her position as an Indo-Canadian) reappropriates the stereotypes of Western-produced Holocaust cinema to complicate the idea around the articulation of difference. In fact, one of Mehta's deliberate strategies in *Earth* is to make Western filmmakers and audiences, who are often bound to a particular way of seeing India, confront their own stereotypical constructions. Mehta states that:

...there are several conceptions that prevail in the west about India. There is firstly the spiritual India—a place where you go and find nirvana. Secondly, there is a conception that India is entirely poverty stricken, with a permanent kind of begging bowl attitude. There is the India of Maharajas, princes and queens, and the India that comes from the nostalgia of the Raj. And there is always the prevailing pressure that people should feel superior to some other place: look how bad India is with all the beggars, aren't we lucky to be better off. It is uncomfortable and difficult for some filmmakers to produce works that destroy these perceptions. India brings specifically fixed images in many western minds, and the minute you start de-exoticising that, you have to deal with Indians as real people, and there is a pressure not to do that.²⁷

In her films, Mehta does not offer a simple reversal or wholesale refusal of these stereotypes, a process that would simply invert the dynamics of power. Instead, she frames her films with the circulation and assignment of stereotypes outside and *within* the fabric of pre and post-Partition society function — at once a source of comic relief among friends, a way to come to terms with ethnic and social difference, or a function of deeply ingrained colonial thinking. In each case, the process of subjectification and potential identifications made possible in these exchanges introduces a self-reflexive focus of interest in the film. Instead of providing audiences the easy assignment of guilt and/or judgment to any one party, *Earth*, in particular, confronts viewers with the uneven process of producing meaning and value during periods of violence, trauma, and incomprehensible change.

Racial commentary, jokes and juxtapositions continually iterated through

²⁶ Ibid., 67.

²⁷ Phillips, “Interview with Deepa Mehta.”

the film emerge as another of Mehta's narrative strategies that reach beyond the stereotypical conventions of Holocaust trauma within *Earth*. Bhabha argues that racial epithets "come to be seen as modes of differentiation, realized as multiple, cross-cutting determinations, polymorphous and perverse, always demanding a specific and strategic calculation of their effects"—that is, the racial stereotype binds a range of differences and discriminations that inform the practice of racial and cultural hierarchization.²⁸ Stereotype as suture, as Bhabha characterizes it, "simplify[s] the politics and (importantly) the aesthetics of spectator positioning by ignoring the ambivalent mode of identification crucial to the enterprise."²⁹ The stereotypical elements of *Earth* merge somewhat with melodrama, but are best defined within the context of the specific rupture that Partition and decolonization draws forward. There are two simultaneous effects. First, the colonial discourses of racial stereotypes that emerge in everyday discussions, encounters, teasing, and joking punctuate the film. Second, the exchange of rumors and hearsay that grow out of the discourses of stereotype catch up the various characters —one noted effect of anxious repeating. In fact, the film begins with rumors about the Partition and ends with the rumors about Lenny's nanny and what becomes of her. These episodes are similar again to frequent episodes in Holocaust films where rumors about the extermination camps and the people who were taken to them ran rampant, playing an important role in plot development.

The scene of Lenny's parents' dinner party near the beginning of the film, in particular, unpacks the oversimplified political stakes of Partition while complicating the spectator's aesthetic position. The intriguing camera work—the way in which it strategically pans around the room—and to the many racial comments and juxtapositions of the neutral Parsees who are situated among and who referee the dispute between the Sikh Mr. Singh and the visiting Englishman. On its surface, there is a facile quality to the way in which this scene is set-up and rendered, seemingly positioning a number of stock characters in a didactic and glib discussion of the various players in India's impending partition. The camera movement is critical to this scene, refusing to 'fix' on any individual until true conflict erupts. The camera's lack of fixity and the anxiety it provokes breaks down and ruptures the apparently simplistic composition of the scene. The point of fixity—when a real argument breaks the light banter—aligns with the moment when the camera tightly frames each individual character, and labeled with a particular stereotype. Mr. Singh becomes the militant and fanatical Sikh, while the Englishman becomes the imposing and treacherous white man. This recalls Bhabha's discussion of racial jokes, whose function is to deny the differences

²⁸ Bhabha, 67.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

of the other a produce “in its stead, forms of authority and multiple belief that alienate the assumptions of ‘civil’ discourse.”³⁰ Certainly, this outcome clearly demonstrates the temporary breakdown of civility in the scene.

Moreover, the function of rumor as an adjunct to the stereotype, underscores the literal sense of circulation and movement in the scene as the process of vacillation, indicative of how the production of stereotypical identification ensues. As Bhabha contends, rumor’s “performative power of circulation results in the contagious spreading, an almost uncontrollable impulse to pass it on to another person...link[ing] it with panic.”³¹ The camera movement draws out this sense of contagion against the mundane elements of the broader visual composition. It is precisely this aspect of the scene that is so compelling, especially with respect to the specificity of Partition history. As Pandey describes, rumors, especially in connection with the scale and range of violence witnessed, were quickly politicized before and during Partition, becoming entangled with all aspects of Partition history and history writing:

In the tertiary discourse, as in the primary and secondary, at the level of the nation, as at that of smaller, local groups of victims, ‘facts and figures’ of this kind continue to be reproduced. The historical discourse continues to bear the stamp of rumour, aggregating the power not so much of verifiable truth, as of a rumoured statistic—extravagant, expandable, unverifiable, but credible. The accounts live on in this form, rooted as they are in deeply held suspicions and beliefs, which are of course further reinforced by such ‘rumoured histories’: ‘truths’ produced by prejudice that further accentuate prejudice.³²

Within *Earth*, the narrative framing of the film re-inscribes the function of a rumored history through a child’s recollected story told in retrospect, a more fragile narrative that bears the stamp of time and possible embellishment. In turn, the dynamic of a child’s story works strategically with the film’s powerful climax where the forces of rumor can no longer be contained, resulting in the murder of Hasan by his one-time friend and the abduction and inferred rape of Lenny’s nanny Shanta. Here, two dramatic and inter-related stories of Partition live on in their violent incomprehensibility, moving across different modes of representation; from personal memory to oral history, to literature, and finally into film.

Therefore, the connection between melodrama and trauma in *Earth* is punctuated by elements grasping at, yet failing to fully comprehend, the

³⁰ Bhabha, 200.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 200-203.

³² Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 91.

enormity of certain manifestations of Partition experience. This phenomena is elucidated most clearly in Ann Kaplan's arguments that melodrama's productive capacity as a popular filmic genre is "to foreground the cracks and tears that are concealed by the coherence of the stories being told."³³ Indeed, much of Kaplan's and other film theorists' recent work on trauma draws directly or indirectly on critical aspects of Holocaust trauma study—namely Dominick LaCapra's compelling body of work on the theoretical and ethical problems that the Holocaust poses to contemporary social relations, in his books *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (1994) and *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (1998). It is in these texts that we find the notion of witnessing, which is taken up by subaltern scholars, particularly by Gayatri Spivak in her case-study on the Rani of Simur.³⁴ In her attempts to retrieve an account of one woman, betrayed, in a sense, by an archive that can not represent her, Spivak seeks "to establish a transference relationship with the Rani of Simur...to be haunted by her slight ghost."³⁵ Spivak pursues an active relationship in telling the past, suspending the most rational aspects of history writing and fact-finding, instead actively and creatively engaging the past and tracing the incongruities and interruptions of human narratives. Importantly, *Earth* is also adapted from an existing and fraught narrative framework, haunted by a first person narrative account of witnessing told in Bapsi Sidhwa's biographical story. Bapsi Sidhwa's biographical story haunts the movie *Earth*, with its actual and difficult historicity. Mehta's insertion of Sidhwa's actual body into the final scene of the film, where Sidhwa plays herself and works through her own grief by momentarily inhabiting the fictional body of Lenny's nanny, and transforms the autonomous act witnessing to one that is both public and intensely personal.

Such concerns for an ethical history, or a process of recalling the past, are echoed in Dominick LaCapra's concerns about understanding and representing the experiences of the Holocaust, as opposed to positioning or sanctifying them beyond all representation. LaCapra has consequently spent a great deal of energy commenting on films such as Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, which resists any kind of narrative structure or use of documentary material from the period. Such forms of representation, LaCapra contends, move the

³³ Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

³⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Rani of Simur' in *Europe and Its Others* ed. Francis Barker et al. (Essex, 1984): 128-151. Spivak references LaCapra's work in the opening pages of this essay.

³⁵ Spivak discusses her original essay on the Rani of Simur in a chapter titled "History" in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward A History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999) 207.

specificity of the events to the realm of sanctification. Therefore, as Debarati Sanyal usefully sums up in a review of LaCapra's work,

One of the most powerful and timely considerations to emerge from LaCapra's critique of current theorizations of trauma is the conflation of historical and structural trauma, a move that divests the traumatic event—and the subject positions within it—of specificity, thus also blocking any viable form of “working through” and moving on.³⁶

The notion of ‘working through’, ‘acting out’ and ‘moving on’ are key interactive elements of LaCapra's trauma theory that build on aspects of psychoanalysis. LaCapra attempts to clarify these ideas in relation to absence and loss, claiming that the acting-out of trauma and the empathetic unsettlement (at times even inducing mute trauma) in primary and secondary witnesses should not foreclose attempts to work through the past and its losses. In fact, LaCapra argues that the ability to distinguish between absence and loss—and its problematic nature—is one aspect of a complex working through process.³⁷ Mehta's own position as a second-generation witness to Bapsi Sidhwa's witnessing, together with the stories Mehta grew up hearing from relatives who survived Partition, is useful to consider in this context. Moreover, the refusal by the Pakistani authority to allow Mehta to film *Earth* in Lahore reinforced the fraught nature of Partition history as lived experience in present day India and Pakistan, and the absences and losses that punctuate communication and interaction between them. Even so, Mehta's persistence in producing the filmic narrative, in the absence of the actual spaces of the original story, illustrates Mehta's imaginative capacity to refuse foreclosing attempts to bring the wider story of Partition to an international audience. Actively engaged in filming *Earth* during the height of the Balkan crisis and nuclear build-up between India and Pakistan in 1999, Mehta makes her position of witness manifest in the final film within the context of her own historical moment.

In light of such acts of resistance, LaCapra proposes a theoretically minded, yet historical approach to trauma that could commemorate the particularity of historical wounds, while recognizing the ways in which the unmasterable past continues to shape our current experiential and conceptual landscape. However, this past and its losses are also subject to a collective process of mourning, working through, and moving on, a trajectory that

³⁶ Debarati Sanyal, “Review of Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma*,” *SubStance* 31.2 (2002): 306.

³⁷ See Dominik LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Summer 1999): 696-727, for full discussion on this point.

ultimately releases us from a cycle of perpetual re-traumatization and allows for a shift towards future-oriented ethical and political projects. In *Earth*, this trajectory is created through the narrative constructs of time that set-up a recollection of the past where traumas are enacted and clear moments of acting out are suggested— such as Lenny’s cathartic ripping apart of her doll after witnessing the beating of a man— leading to the final scene where the past and present are collapsed around the ambiguous signifier of a colonial cemetery. Overall, LaCapra’s work is engaged with overcoming binaries between absence/loss and victim/aggressor in a way that activates the site of trauma as a legitimate concern. In this sense, LaCapra vehemently rejects Pierre Nora’s work on memory and history since he claims there is a “neutralization of trauma” together with an insufficient attempt to move trauma into critical discussion.³⁸ The notions of “the middle voice” and that of “empathic unsettlement,” thus emerge in LaCapra’s work as vehicles for representing trauma.³⁹ The middle voice hovers between active and passive modes: “The middle voice would thus be the ‘in between’ voice of undecidability and the unavailability or radical ambivalence of clear-cut positions.”⁴⁰ To counteract the excessive identification with trauma and victimization, which is central to the connection between melodrama and stereotypes, LaCapra’s concept of “empathic unsettlement” emerges as an affective response that he considers most appropriate to the reception of another’s traumatic past. This unsettlement or resistance of fixity recognizes the affective impact of another’s traumatic history, yet respects its irreducible specificity, and avoids conflating empathy with identification.

Within recent Partition historiography, works focusing on the abduction and rape of women — the very drama around which *Earth* finds a moment of dramatic climax— reveal women’s bodies as the contested ground, the very territory upon which notions of subjectivity, agency, and the imagined nation are constructed during times of violence. Drawing on postcolonial feminism and a rich tradition of feminist scholarship in India that deals with challenging cultural practices such as the act of *sati* (wife-burning), the possibility for theorizing the gendered nature of subjectification and identity formation expands and underscores the terms of LaCapra’s arguments about the “middle voice.”⁴¹ This recent partition scholarship provides the potential to further

³⁸ Domink LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*,

⁴¹ see for example Lata Mani, “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women Press, 1989): 82-126.

unpack the binary and hierarchical categories of victimization and trauma that LaCapra argues are indicative of many Holocaust narratives. As Ambreen Hai argues, in an essay that investigates the character of the nanny (also known as the “Ayah”) in Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*, it is on the borders, the space of the in-between, occupied by many of the women of Partition where “crucial perspectival shifts, can have liberatory potential.”⁴² These kinds of border regions and heterogeneous cultures that build up, bear the burden, and go on to survive the worst forms of violence. Hai argues for the rethinking of “border work” in light of the specific location of Lahore:

In recent postcolonial work a focus has emerged that considers not only boundary *crossing* (which takes the border to be a signifier of division, constraint, or limitation), but also of border *inhabitation*— on the ‘interstices’ between, or the spaces of overlap—which regards the border itself (and the subjectivity of those positioned on the border) as a critical if ambiguous site of vital reconstruction, a position replete with contradictions and problems, but also with regenerative promise.⁴³

Literature and films by “third world” women writers are of particular interest to Hai because of the strategies of survival that are continually negotiated in face of “the contradictions of cultural heterogeneity, modernity, nationalism, or diasporic identity.”⁴⁴ Sidhwa and Mehta’s individual and collaborative contributions on Partition— within the context of their own experience as women living, inhabiting, and surviving on the border of North American and South Asian cultures— open up new ways of conceptualizing LaCapra’s call within Holocaust studies to break the cycles of neutralizing episodes of trauma or engaging in the act of perpetual re-traumatization.

Returning to the question posed at the outset of this examination— What can be gained from *Earth*’s engagement with the “discourses of Holocaust trauma?” and, conversely, what can the experience of partition violence bring to Holocaust studies?— we can begin answering this question with yet another. How are the limits of representation and incommensurability of difference negotiated in the film and to what ends? *Earth* represents and helps construct, both visually and textually, the “making of the partitioned subject” in a way that negotiates several issues pertaining to the ambivalence and anxiety surrounding trauma. These include the use of melodramatic conventions and the taking up of multiple subject positions to facilitate the oscillation between particular fixed positions in Partition history, together with the overall lack

⁴² Ambreen Hai, “Border Work, Border Trouble: Postcolonial Feminism and the Ayah in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.2 (2000): 381.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*,

and emptiness seen in the film's visual excesses. In turn, the film aims to work through a number of issues relating specifically to Partition trauma that echo and resonate with current world crises. These include the positing and circulation of racial stereotypes, the power and panic-inflicting nature of rumor, and the problem of incommensurability (though, importantly not radical incommensurability) between nation states.

Perhaps more profoundly, however, *Earth* and Mehta's representation of "India's holocaust" inserts itself into critical debates between Holocaust historians and those engaged in recuperating and representing accounts of Holocaust survivors. Responding in some measure to LaCapra's concerns, *Earth* and the specific dynamics of India's Partition trauma successfully breaks down easy distinctions between aggressors, perpetrators, and silent observers, presenting a middle voice and attempting to produce an empathic unsettlement in the narrative structure of the film. The focus on the specifically human dimension around the partition of India facilitates this unsettlement, presenting a moment of history that is, by its nature, highly ambiguous when it comes to assigning guilt. Here too the memories of Lenny and the body of her nanny, as sites upon which cultural and national traditions and laws are negotiated in *Earth*, articulates an altered vision of borders and "in-betweenness" that radically transforms, breaks down, and expands notions of violence, trauma and survival. Moreover, *Earth* complicates the conflation of structural and historical trauma through the merging of visual elements seen in Holocaust films in order to invest the specificity of the historical moment and all its attendant subject positions within a wider understanding of human suffering across the board. In this way, *Earth*'s particular filmic vocabulary responds in meaningful ways to Pandey's call for a "language of violence"—shared across racial, ethnic, and national identities. Ultimately, a return to ethical concern, human understanding, and a move towards healing lies at the heart of *Earth*'s engagement with the discourses of Holocaust trauma—but firmly within the context of that allows for specific histories, the breaking apart of binaries, and the recognition of culturally and historically specific accounts of experience.

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