

Briauna Azer

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Partition: A Theme Not Easily Parted With

On the surface, movies appear to be made for the entertainment of an audience. Although the colorful costumes, ornate sets, and dramatic romances depicted on the screen are all provided as elements of amusement for viewers, sometimes filmmakers wish to do more with their pictures. In *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema: 1947-1987* author Sumita S. Chakravarty describes this phenomenon well: “History and cinema are both institutions, forms of narration, and sites of ideological struggle. As such, the cinema of a particular nation selects historical events that either glorify the past or help to throw light on the present” (Chakravarty 1993: 158). Directors have leveraged the film industry as a mouthpiece of communication. One such topic has become famous for its debate in cinema: the Partition of India. Three films in particular, *Dharmputra*, *Meera*, and *Mughal-e-Azam*, can be used as a case study to examine the revolutionary agenda of Indian directors. Each of these films carries a message for the post-Partition audience: *Dharmputra* establishes the event’s religious identity crisis, *Meera* comments on the negative consequences of radical spiritual devotion, and *Mughal-e-Azam* showcases the importance of change through a father-son relationship. Each of these movies addresses the Hindu-Muslim animosity that plagues India after the partition and offers up some sort of solution, as well as a call to nationalism.

Chopra’s 1961 film *Dharmputra* is focused on analyzing the identity crisis India is experiencing at the time of Partition. The primary mode for communicating this struggle between

the Hindus and Muslims is made manifest in the character of Dilip. In the film, Dilip's mother, Banu, gives birth to him out of wedlock and decides to avoid the stigma of this taboo situation by handing the child over to be raised by her Hindu acquaintances, Amritray and Savitri. Author Cecilia Cossio offers valuable perspective on this adoption in her contributions to *Indian Literature and Popular Cinema: Recasting Classics*: "In the film, the son of Muslims is welcomed as one's own son, for whom there never arises the slightest feeling of 'difference.' Dilip, even when he becomes a Hindu extremist and thus very far from Amritray and Savitri's way of thinking, will always be seen and loved as a flesh-and-blood son" (Pauwels 2007: 227). Amritray and Savitri see their friend in need and willingly adopted the Muslim-born child; despite Dilip's Muslim heritage and his later extremism, this Hindu parents choose to love him unconditionally, as if he were their biological child. Through Dilip's upbringing Banu, Amritray, and Savitri appear to be just as revolutionary as the protestors outside their homes. As the chants for brotherhood between Hindus and Muslims ring out on the streets, the audience sees this ideal come to fruition inside the home.

However, as Cossio mentions, as Dilip grows he does not seem to echo the same accepting nature illustrated by both his adoptive and biological parents. Instead, and ironically, he becomes a Hindu extremist. As this transformation progresses, viewers see Dilip's hatred and prejudice for Muslims develop. The plot of the movie thickens when Banu returns from being abroad and the Hindu-Muslim revolution going on in the background of the film escalades. Then, the climatic moment of the movie takes place: Dilip, with a heart of loathing, tries to burn down Banu's house and his adoptive parents can only stop him by revealing the identity of his true birth mother. Thus, Dilip spirals into an identity crisis. All his life he has worked to establish himself as a devout Hindu, but the revelation of his true origins shatters his identity. Dilip

captures the essence of his crisis as he cries out in frustration, “By telling me what I was yesterday, you have killed my today” (*Dharmputra*). This boy’s ~~s-character~~ is thrown into limbo: he has two mothers, yet seems to be an orphan; he has two religions, but seems cannot find solace in either. It is in this fractured state that Chopra begins to address the Partition, specifically the hatred still festering between Hindus and Muslims. He brings into question the idea of the true self, and compels his viewers to consider the possibility that they might not really be so different from their enemies.

It is clear Chopra sets up these hard questions related to Dilip’s identity crisis to draw parallels with that of the Partition, his solution for Dilip will likewise be applicable to a post-Partition India. Cossio discusses how this director carefully sets up his parallels to the Partition with the progression of the revolution depicted throughout the film:

The second part of the movie starts with the return of Javed and Banu. India has profoundly changed, Hindus and Muslims have gone their separate ways and the phrase *Hindu-Muslim bhai-bhai* (“Hindu and Muslim: Brother to each other”) has been superseded by two others: *Allahu-akbar* (“Allah is great”) and *Jay Barjrangbali* (“Victory to Barjangbali”). (Pauwels 2007: 224)

The language here was once of family unity, now the chants of each party have a greater resemblance to war cries. This transformation clearly mimics Dilip’s change of behavior as he wages war against his birth mother’s household. Chopra is openly playing of these two aspects of his film as he tries to use motherhood to hint at nationalism. India is the motherland and the familial hardships coming to life on the screen mirror those experienced by the post-Partition nation of India. Consider, for example, these words of caution spoken in the film, “The one who

refuses to be the son of his own mother is a traitor to his country and can never be anyone's friend" (*Dharmputra*). When Dilip rejects and persecutes his mother, he is a traitor; moreover, when a Hindu rejects a Muslim or a Muslim betrays a Hindu, the offender disgraces the entire nation of India.

Furthermore, by picking mother figures to represent the two sides of this conflict, Hindu and Muslim, Chopra tries to reconcile the parties. It is said in the movie, "Religions do not make humans, they make humans fight each other" (*Dharmputra*). The Partition was a horrific time for India, and left many wounds on the nation that would take time to heal. But healing becomes an even lengthier process when abrasions keep getting ripped open by religious prejudice. Chopra is compelling India to move beyond conflict, and look to fulfill a greater good. Just as Banu and Savitri want the best for Dilip, Hindus and Muslims should both want what is best for India. Chopra's message is clear: two parents must shed their respective religious bigotry and work together to raise one son.

In contrast to *Dharmputra*, Gulzar's 1979 film *Meera* can be seen as a case study regarding the consequences resulting from an inability to step outside the realm of radical religion. *Meera* is an interpretation of the historical character Mirabai who demonstrates the srngara flavor of *bhakti*. Meera is so devoted to the god Krishna that she believes he is her true husband. However, through changing political circumstances she is forced to take an earthly husband, Prince Bhojraj. Meera makes it clear she will never love Bhojraj, and holds fast to this resolve.

This decision proves to be a detrimental one for Meera. Her radical faith shocks her in-laws ~~make~~ and as a result, they make life very hard for her. Bhojraj's family questions the

integrity of her faith, disgraces her idol, and harbors extreme hatred for her. Yet, all the while, Meera holds fast to her devotion, only fueling their extreme dislike for her. Author Heidi Pauwels comments on this radical *bhakti* in her additions to *Indian Literature and Popular Cinema: Recasting Classics*: “Mira’s devotion is shown to be excessive and to undercut her real-life happiness. Thus the message is that she is not to be imitated by ordinary women, Mira is unique, no other woman can be like her or should follow her footsteps” (Pauwels 2007: 115-116). Meera’s extreme devotion causes more harm than good, and it plagues her throughout the movie. In fact, in the final scenes of the film she sings: “Had I known this, that when you love, you’ll reap sorrow, I would have announced on the drum: No one should love!” (*Meera*). Here, Meera finally seems to come to the realization that her devotion has not yielded a healthy harvest. Instead, weeds of misery plague her garden.

In addition to exploring the negative personal consequences of Meera’s *bhakti*, Gulzar chooses to showcase how her devotion affects others. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the declining health of her husband. When the audience first meets Bhojraj, he is a strong, commanding prince, riding in on horseback and giving orders. However, at the end of the film, Bhojraj can barely stand and is helpless in the process of deciding Meera’s verdict. This transition is important for the audience to catch: it happens gradually, as Meera’s heart hardens, her husband is steadily weakened. Audiences must view this de-evolution as a metaphor for how extreme spiritual devotion will weaken and inhibit political powers. In the context of the Partition, this metaphor takes root: wars between religions fracture the land of India and initiates political chaos. Just as Meera should love her husband instead of harming him, the people of India, Hindu or Muslim, should strive to care for one another rather than harming each other, so as not to contribute to political uproar.

After discussing the negative effects Meera's *bhakti* has both personally and collectively, Gulzar²s indicates her actions have the power to leave one lasting mark: through her legacy.

After the accumulation of numerous offenses, it is decided by the court that Meera shall be put to death by drinking a cup of poison, yet miraculously she survives. Only the astute viewer will be able to identify the "miracle" in this scene is, in fact, the final piece of Gulzar's agenda. The goal behind this murder attempt is to do away with Meera and relieve the city of her toxic presence. Yet, Meera could not be easily disposed of. She will survive for a while longer and her legacy continues will continue on, even today. Consider, for example, what authors Hawley and Juergensmeyer have to say about the current influence of Mirabai as they summarize her fame: "Mira's poems are probably the most familiar. More than any other saint...she has become a pan-Indian figure. Her songs are sung all the way to the southernmost tip of the sub-continent" (Hawley 1988: 120). After establishing her prominence, they continue on by commenting on her modern-day recognition: her songs are still popular, she is actively portrayed in films, temples honor her, and schools have been founded in her memory (Hawley 1988: 121). Gulzar knows he is playing with an iconic figure and leverages this power to communicate with his post-Partition audience. As showcased in *Meera*, this main character leaves a legacy behind of hurt, selfishness, and chaos. In the same fashion, viewers should come to the conclusion that all the anguish, horror, and carnage that took place during the Partition will not pass after the mass migrations are completed. Rather, these dark moments in history will leave lasting scars. In light of this, Gulzar warns his audience against continued radical devotion: it will only extend the life of these abrasions, and thereby be a defining feature on the face of India. If this nation ever hopes to move beyond Partition, to overcome Hindu-Muslim hatred, it must set aside radical

prejudice and aim for reconciliation, thereby saving the legacy of India and implementing change to be observed by generations to come.

K. Asif's *Mughal-e-Azam* furthers this focus on India's legacy as it portrays the relationship between Emperor Akbar and Prince Salim. The movie begins with the map of India describing greatness of Akbar but then poses a daunting problem: this king has no heir to the throne. The narrator, which personifies the country of India, talks at length about Akbar's strong desire for a son and his efforts to acquire one. It is only natural the emperor would be so troubled; Akbar knows without an heir the legacy of his greatness will die with him. Similarly, those affected by the Partition should be deeply concerned with their role in India's legacy. As the map recalls, the only remedy for this dire situation was that this great leader, whom everyone bowed to, eventually had to bow down in humility (*Mughal-e-Azam*). It was only after prayer and supplication that Akbar finally receives word his wife is pregnant. The audience must be careful not to carelessly glance over the implications of such a resolution: Akbar is Muslim, and Queen Joda Bai is Hindu. Despite their religious differences, Akbar and Joda Bai manage to live in peace with one another and the audience sees blessing, in the form of a child, sprout from their unity. Within the context of the of a Muslim king and a Hindu queen, the audience will see a K. Asif is hinting at India in it's fractured, post-Partition state. There is no future for a nation who is divided by hatred. If Hindus and Muslims cannot reconcile, the greatness of India will be lost. Moreover, if they can, they should set their sights on the certain blessings, which will surely come from such a partnership.

After creating the context for a father son relationship by providing the king's character with an heir, K. Asif then uses the theme of co-existing bodies to further this relationship's relevance to his audience. This premise is first established with many references throughout the

film related to biological similarities between characters. Consider, for example, India's narration of Salim's time spent away from home as a warrior. As the audience is told of the prince's great valor and his impressive accomplishments on the battlefield, they are also told that Salim's blood is Akbar's blood and it is spread over the land with every victory (*Mughal-e-Azam*). Although separated by distance, Salim affects the wellbeing of his father's kingdom. The spilling of blood allows the prince to honor the emperor; K. Asif is capitalizing on the inescapable familial bond that will forever link the king and prince. Later, as Salim and his parents begin to quarrel over his relationship with Anarkali, the director again reminds the audience of this bond when Salim asks his mother, "Have you forgotten that I am part of your body?" (*Mughal-e-Azam*). This familial correlation ingeniously mirrors the nationalistic connection binding Hindus and Muslims together. These two parties should make up the brotherhood of India, but the Partition aims to violently separate them. As the migrations occur, blood is being violently spilt. Unlike Salim's war efforts on the battlefield, however, these are not honorable actions. Instead, these wounds are self-destructive, weakening the collective body that once made up a strong India.

In the midst of discussing coexisting bodies, K. Asif weaves another commentary on the Partition into his film with the scales of justice. These massive scales frame the movie as they are referenced both in the start and end of the film. Before Salim is exiled to the battlefield the audience sees a candid shot of the prince as a boy riding the scale up and down. This clearly is foreshadowing a forthcoming struggle the Salim will experience between love and duty. It is also curious that this scene resembles the prince playing alone on a teeter-totter; but instead of completely weighing down one side of the scale, he rides it up and down. This back-and-forth movement illustrates the imminent confusion regarding his romance with Anarkali. Furthermore,

by playing on these esteemed scales the prince is disrespecting his position; Salim toys with justice, it is merely a plaything.

Like Salim, Emperor Akbar also has a noteworthy interaction with the scales of justice. As he sentences Anarkali to death, her maid mother comes to redeem a promise the king made to her years ago, and begs for the life of Anarkali. Instead of honoring his word, Akbar says he recalls nothing of the agreement, and hits the ring he had originally given the woman as a reminder of their pact out of her hands. The ring lands on the scales, stirring them into motion. Again, the audience is exposed to the seemingly impossible balancing act between love and duty each character must face. Given the current culture and ideology that defines life in the palace, these sides of the scale cannot be reconciled. Thus, K. Asif introduces the importance of change.

The significance of evolution is expressed in the second half of the film. Akbar says it well to his son, “Destiny changes, time changes, the nation’s history changes, emperors change- Salim you will have to change” (*Mughal-e-Azam*). Although this advice is more of a command to from a father to his son, the audience will see these words become applicable to both characters later in the film. Salim does, in fact, change. His memory is erased and he will have to start anew, oblivious of previous romance. Likewise, the character of Akbar also changes with his release of Anarkali.

As K. Asif resolves his movie with these modifications to his characters, he seems to be asking something similar of India. For this country the scales do not balance love and duty, but Islam and Hinduism, and they are in motion. This religious conflict seems cyclical: one side rises and appears to overcome the other, only to suddenly move back in the reverse direction. As hatred continues to tip the scale, no balance can be maintained. To bring this conflict to rest,

India must follow in the footsteps of Akbar and Salim. They must remember bygone days where they coexisted in harmony-, Akbar's promise was made on such a day when he found out his wife was with child. Additionally, they must be willing to forget, just as Salim forgets. The horrific carnage of the Partition resembles the prince's harmful, selfish relationship with Anarkali. To continue on in peace with his family, he must leave it behind him. In the same fashion, India must shed its dark past.

Through a close study of *Dharmputra*, *Meera*, and *Mugal-e-Azam* a critical audience will realize that the Indian director tries to communicate so much more than a simple scene on the big screen. These movies are all clearly looking at one negative aspect of the Partition with regards to the hatred between Hindus and Muslims. Through an identity crisis in *Dharmputra*, Chopra clearly communicates Hindus and Muslims both belong to the motherland of India, and each party must shed their religious prejudice for the well being of their nation. In *Meera*, Gulzar wants his audience to understand that radical devotion has negative consequences for the devotee and those who are close to them, but can also harmfully effect future generations through a lasting legacy. He obviously is communicating the need for Indians, Hindu or Muslim, to set aside their radical practices. Finally, K. Asif's *Mugal-e-Azam* conveys the importance of change: like Salim and Akbar, Hindus and Muslims are unable to balance. They must evolve in order to carry on peacefully. Author Heidi Pauwels offers a nice perspective on how viewers are to make sense directorial interventions her contributions *Indian Litriture and Popular Cinema: Recasting Classics*: "You can see in their work how classics resonate with times other than their own, live beyond their own worlds, and provide the next with frameworks for self-reflection" (Pauwels 2007: 201). Filmmakers hope to accomplish so much more than the portrayal of a well-known story in their historical movies. They want the audience to form connections with present day

events and inspire them towards acts of social change. These Bollywood movies are more than pictures, they are the history of India: both in the sense of what has happened, and what is to come.

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