

**"This is our Holocaust":  
Deepa Mehta's *Earth* and the  
Question of Partition Trauma  
By Dorothy Barescott**

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*

The changing nature of India's Partition history, especially when turning to the most recent works concerning the memories and experiences of witnesses and their narrative accounts, appears at some level to inhabit or more likely be "haunted" by the events surrounding the Holocaust in Europe at roughly the same historical moment. It is perhaps not surprising then that much of the most radical revisionism of India's Partition history is being produced by scholars situated (or schooled within) Western institutions of learning, or as part of the globalization of academic discourse emerging with the Subaltern Studies Project where interests around witnessing, trauma, subjectivity and history have a direct and theoretically informed connection to this specific event. As many recent titles suggest, the interest in witnessing, memory, and personal accounts has come to characterize a new direction in Partition historiography. One relevant and recent example is Sukeshi Karma's book *Bearing Witness: Partition, Independence, End of the Raj*, a title that is echoed in several similar titles discussing Holocaust narratives such as Hazel Rochman's *Bearing witness : Stories of the Holocaust* or Henry Feinglod's *Bearing witness : How America and its Jews Responded to the Holocaust*. When I say that these works on Partition are theoretically informed by the events of the Holocaust, I am referring to the unavoidable connections to a litany of key thinkers drawn on or informing aspects of these revisionist works such as Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Francois Lyotard, Jacques Lacan and others, for whom the Holocaust bore a particular relevance to the formation of their respective ideas around history, representation, the will to power, the human psyche and the body.<sup>1</sup> Turning to cinema—a medium that Ann Kaplan argues, given modernity's impact, *is trauma*<sup>2</sup>—and its attendant arms of film theory and film criticism, a similar situation emerges. It is the

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<sup>1</sup> I refer readers to Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg's collection of essays in *Postmodernism and the Holocaust* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 1998) for a critical discussion on this topic. See especially Tracy Fessenden's "Mark C. Taylor and the Limits of the Postmodern Imagination"; Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg's "Michel Foucault, Auschwitz, and the Destruction of the Body"; and John McCumber's "The Holocaust as Master Rupture: Foucault, Fackenheim, and 'Postmodernity.'"

<sup>2</sup> Ann Kaplan, "Can Trauma Mark Cinema?" Paper presented as part of the Joan Carlisle-Irving Lecture Series, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., March 2001.

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, I will argue in this paper, pulls Deepa Mehta's film *Earth* (1999) [figures 1 & 2] and the topic of India's Partition within the nexus of specific debates surrounding the limits of representation with respect to violence and the body. For a number of reasons that I will outline, *Earth* has been described and critiqued within the context of the loaded signifier "Holocaust", subjecting what some critics have termed "India's *Schindler's List*" to a similar polarity in reception witnessed by Western films of the Jewish Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> In turn, the history and memory of events particular to India and represented in *Earth* appear to posit 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, whom I argue draws intentionally 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."<sup>4</sup> And while such an alignment can appear as a problematic and failed outcome of the film's attempt to gain global recognition for a seldom broached aspect of a *specifically Indian* moment in history, the aim of this paper is to trouble these assertions and examine what implications, outcomes, production of meanings, and theoretical potentials exist within *Earth*'s visual and hermeneutic engagement with (that is, unfolding the signification of) what I will term "the discourses of Holocaust trauma."

My point of departure is Gyanendra Pandey's recent work on the memory and history of India's Partition in *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* and the analyses Pandey makes about how the Partition has been remembered, forgotten and represented.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, 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 this violence goes against Indian or Pakistani tradition and understandings of their respective national histories.<sup>6</sup> In turn, Pandey calls for Partition to be seen as a moment of "rupture", sharing something of the political and psychic outcome of other places that experienced decolonization in the twentieth century, especially with respect to the character of violence witnessed (i.e. killing, rape, arson).

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<sup>3</sup> 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>

<sup>4</sup> See Richard Phillips, "Interview with Deepa Mehta," World Socialist Website, 6 August 1999:

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

<sup>5</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. It is of course important to reiterate the salient differences of the Jewish Holocaust and Indian Partition with regards to the way national identities were transformed through the violence. However, the idea of disavowing certain aspects of the actual events to a national history is key in both cases. One need only be reminded of France's own ambivalent relationship to Holocaust history or, indeed, the constantly changing histories of former communist countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary to illustrate how the desire to distance national traditions and histories from such atrocity or significantly re-write or re-conceptualize the violence occurs at some broader level of nation-state formation.

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 can be reconstituted that is shared among a number of subjects and asks the question of how this moment of struggle can be written back into history and described while simultaneously suggesting the impossibility of the enterprise. In other words, Pandey wants to reveal how different and varied the Partition looks and is experienced from various perspectives, conveying the enormity of the event. Critically, Pandey comments on the resurgence of ethnic nationalism within India as cause for careful reexamination of Partition and specifically for how it is represented.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, it is precisely because of the high emotion 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 narrative constructions of both an Indian and Pakistani past. A cursory glance at the diverse outpouring of academic scholarship on Partition, especially since the mid-1980's, reveals that attempts to revisit and recapture such a potent and complex moment of violence remain highly divided and isolated along disciplinary, national, and/or theoretical boundaries.<sup>8</sup> Whether artificially distanced or a result of deliberate scholarship, the works appear as either histories 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. And while the past two decades have seen a new generation of scholars attempt to incorporate fiction and personalized histories into the broader accounts of the political negotiations between the British, the Congress, and the Muslim League that led to the creation of Pakistan, there are often gaps or disconnections that remain in the co-mingling of narratives. As David Gilmartin argues in his overview of Partition historiography, "the violence of partition itself has resisted effective integration with the political narrative of partition's causes."<sup>9</sup> In an earlier essay on the problem of Partition histories, Pandey locates these and other key limitations of Partition historiography within a broader framework of colonialist and nationalist historical writing, arguing 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."<sup>10</sup> One consequence, as Ayesha Jalal argues in an equally telling

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<sup>7</sup> These resurgences are today echoed world-wide within the fraught Post-Cold War environment that has brought into focus the way notions of state *legitimacy* can be challenged and reconfigured. Rewriting and circulating popular histories (some would claim propaganda) is key to these developments. Pandey warns that it is these "non-academic" and "popular" histories that are often sidelined and ignored in the academic production and discussion of history.

<sup>8</sup> For the most recent discussion and 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.

<sup>9</sup> Gilmartin, 1069.

<sup>10</sup> Pandey, "Prose of Otherness" 204.

assessment of recent Partition writings, is that the scholarship continues to be read and critiqued along national lines. Even non-partisan scholarship “rarely escapes being labeled ‘made in India’ or ‘made in Pakistan.’”<sup>11</sup>

If then there is potential in the most recent Partition literature to move in new directions and provide a way out of the troubled predicament that the question of Partition occupies in Indian historiography, it may well be found in those writings that attempt to come to terms with and construct meanings out of the specificities and aftermath of Partition violence and trauma. Drawing on the powerful anthologies of Partition stories as inspiration<sup>12</sup>, the recent scholarship that deals most directly with the resettlement of refugees, the recovery of abducted and raped women, and the complexities of familial and communal relationships in the wake of Partition, provides a way to deal with 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.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, as Gilmartin suggests, echoing Pandey’s call to reexamine representations of India’s Partition, there is a way 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.”<sup>14</sup> In turn, the promise of the latest turn in Partition historiography is a return to the body and of a taking up of a spatial

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<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> Pandey and Gilmartin both cite Alok Bhalla’s edited book, *Stories About the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Indus, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> 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;

<sup>14</sup> Gilmartin, 1069 (emphasis mine).

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 then is seen precisely in his call for an examination of how difference is disciplined within the construction of a national history, especially a history within the multiethnic and multicultural make-up of the Indian subcontinent. As such, a close study of the varied and diverse experiences of Partition and witness accounts is called for, with a particular interest in sharing these findings on a wide public scale. This scale is conceived within the context of an expanding global discourse on the overall processes entailed in the production of history. Notably, Pandey argues that Pierre Nora and other Western historians have set forth ideas about history and memory that tend to confine history to narrow spaces of academic production. In response to this, Pandey asks for something of an integration or co-mingling of histories across global boundaries as a way to locate the sites of difference and convergence in an interactive and much broader 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.<sup>15</sup>

Importantly, Pandey seems to suggest that something of the original term “holocaust” can be recaptured, shaped, and reappropriated by Partition history to move the terms of discussion in new directions. In this way, the term “holocaust” is renewed and the debates surrounding it are potentially complexified:

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.<sup>16</sup>

How then are “the discourses of Holocaust trauma” productive in the context of Pandey's concerns? I will make a few preliminary observations here. 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 is actively

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<sup>15</sup> Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

engaged with this “problem” of secondary witnessing (especially since those 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 suggests, a number of critical issues punctuate Holocaust studies: “What is at 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.”<sup>17</sup> Representations of the Holocaust thus 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.”<sup>18</sup> In turn, 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, it is within the context of Holocaust studies that a broader global discourse on the nature of violence is opening up. This occurs, in part, as a result of the mass exodus of Holocaust survivors from Europe in the 1930’s and 40’s, but also in relation to the means through which the narratives of survival, violence and exile were produced and spatialized in the decades following World War II—emerging as a build up of multi-national and multi-lingual voices across vast distances and times.

Therefore, the visual vocabulary of Holocaust imagery taken up in *Earth* tends to posit the film within debates already made about Holocaust films. I would argue then that this positing permits a wider dimension of the historical moment of India’s Partition to be measured (beyond even the most recent Partition scholarship) allowing for a discussion of identity and contesting subject positions to emerge visually, textually, and spatially, through the filmic medium and Mehta’s adaptation of one Partition story—Bapsi Sidhwa’s 1989 autobiographical novel, *Cracking India*. This 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 troubles simple binaries between memory and history, and Nora’s pronouncements of the end of the nation and its attendant national history by positioning trauma and the visceral account of suffering as a crucial and valid subject of inquiry and discussion. Ultimately, this engagement with theory around Holocaust trauma moves the moment of India’s Partition and Mehta’s work to a position loaded with much higher stakes—a position where ethics and the recuperation of some humanistic element to critical theories of memory, trauma, and violence (being that the Holocaust was a network of human actions) takes place. In turn, considerations of India’s Partition history and the complexities of particular traumas contributes to and expands the larger project of holocaust study *writ large*, which is currently mired in debate over seeing the Holocaust as being indicative of all structural trauma or within the scope of its own historical moment (i.e. the universal versus the specific).

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<sup>17</sup> John E. Toews, “Review of Dominik LaCapra’s *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*” *American Historical Review* (February 1995): 130.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Moving to the specific elements of *Earth*, film reviews<sup>19</sup> are telling with regards to the urgency (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 Pandey describes in the production of written Partition narratives. On one extreme, there are reviews such as the *New York Post*'s, which calls *Earth*, "A remarkable accomplishment. It takes one of the century's vast tragedies...and makes it heart-rendingly real and intimate", to a review in *LA Weekly*, which 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 on the other extreme, a review in the *Village Voice* criticizes *Earth* as passionately as its supporters, exclaiming: "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." 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 *Schindler's List* (especially when compared to Claude Lanzmaan'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 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.<sup>20</sup>

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 become

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<sup>19</sup> I have compiled a cross-selection of *Earth*'s most prominent reviews in Western media from [www.metacritic.com](http://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> This is not to ignore reviews emanating from India, rather it is to focus on those kinds of critiques that help inform the underpinnings of my argument about *Earth*'s engagement with certain kinds of filmic conventions seen in broader Holocaust cinema.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

written off as fiction or “bad history”—relegating and marginalizing relevant contributions of Partition experience and remembrance.<sup>21</sup>

In turn, Hansen’s argument about 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 similar filmic conventions 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, I would argue that Mehta’s references to the kinds of conventions employed in the most “popular” Holocaust films is likewise more productive and critically provocative than the *Village Voice* critic I cited earlier or the British film critic who described *Earth* as “a Bollywood influenced confection...that attempts to shock with a catalogue of atrocities.”<sup>22</sup> 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,” together with 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, eliciting strong universal resonance and engendering some sense of empathy with respect to all human suffering.<sup>23</sup> Importantly, Mehta conceived of her film in terms of melodramatic construction, placing domestic settings and familial images within the context of larger social systems that would be exposed in the narrative as corrupt and repressive: “...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.”<sup>24</sup>

Melodrama, in light of issues related directly to trauma, history, and memory has been considered most recently within a far broader critical range of possibility, facilitating a more complex reading of films that represent intense human suffering within the framework of a love story or personal drama, such as Mehta’s *Earth* and Spielberg’s

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<sup>21</sup> Of course there is also the possibility that some of these “alternative” and/or non-academic histories come to substitute or override what are understood as the dominant or “metahistories” of Partition. And while there are many positive applications to this scenario, this historical revisionism can pose as many problems as it seeks to undermine, namely the possibility of reinscribing renewed discrimination along class, ethnic, gender, and national lines.

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, any comparison of Mehta’s *Earth* to an earlier film on Partition, M.S. Sathyu’s *Garam Hawa*, (1973) bears this kind of scrutiny. While I have been unable to find any reviews in English or translation that directly compare the two films, I would contend that *Garam Hawa* fits more comfortably in the category of “art film” than does *Earth*. This is in part because Sathyu’s film style is compared to that of Satyajit Ray and De Sica—directors thought to embody certain aspects of *cinema verite* in their films, fostering a sense of realism or authenticity— whereas Mehta’s use of melodramatic conventions relegates her film (and many aspects of how her film is critiqued) more readily to the realms of Hollywood or commercial movie-making. Notably, *Earth* made its debut at a number of small film festivals before seeing a wider release in India and North America.

<sup>23</sup> Phillips.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



*Schindler's List*. When turning to the conventional description of a melodrama, it is generally characterized as a simple drama of exaggerated emotions, stereotypical characters, and interpersonal conflicts, often using 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.<sup>25</sup> Importantly, Singer describes melodrama in terms of *excess*, triggering and inviting certain visceral and active responses from the spectator such as crying (i.e. the tearjerker—another manifestation of excess). And 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 of dominant patriarchal ideology.”<sup>26</sup> One consequence is that these energies, like “neurotic symptoms” are diverted and channeled through other forms of expression, especially, Singer argues, in nonnaturalistic *mise-en-scene*—conspicuously over saturated colours, sumptuous furnishing, lighting, overdetermined props etc. Within *Earth*, one need only think of how the lighting and use of color overall creates an aesthetically “beautiful” film with carefully constructed shots [figures 3&4], while abounding in the use of “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, and the story of the ever-adaptive chameleon to reflect the neutral Parsi position in Indian politics [figure 5].

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, 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 Hassan watches people begin leaving the city of Lahore in anticipation of Partition [figure 6]. The haunting music, dramatic use of lighting that casts eerie shadows on the passive, zombie-like individuals [figure 7], the back and forth shots between the procession and the silent witness who is unable to speak and is shown helpless in his observation of events, the herding of people at night with all of their possessions<sup>27</sup>, 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 deported. The second, more pivotal scene, occurs when

<sup>25</sup> Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 44-48.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, the Holocaust narrative employed in this sequence overrides the historical accuracy of the Partition narrative taken up in this scene, since it is inconsistent with reports that people had little time to pack their belongings. As such, we can note an instance in the film where the narratives of the Holocaust and Partition blur.

a train filled with the butchered bodies of Muslims arrives at the station in Lahore [figure 8]. The train, as modern machinery and transporter of death [figure 9], arrives and the sounds of screaming witnesses to the travesty overwhelm the music. From the bodies piled up and aesthetically arranged in the train [figure 10], to the use of colour and lighting that draw the eye's attention to the bodies' surfaces [figure 11], and once again the insertion of a dramatic score with a pulsing beat, bears similarities to Holocaust films where the train and its impending arrival signal horror and the 'path towards certain death' for its passengers.

I raise these comparisons in an attempt to illustrate how *Earth*, at some level, is engaging with filmic strategies that simultaneously 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 staging of events at roughly the same period in history, where costumes, technologies (such as the train and radio), and social practices can overlap, what I am arguing is that these scenes carry even more force because of the doubling up of the episodes of Partition with the filmic vocabulary of the Holocaust. In turn, Mehta is able to posit the specificities of these incidents within the context of those episodes of violence that are most repeated, and hence, most anxious-making 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 something of the same horror, but 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. Homi Bhabha's discussion of the stereotype, in particular, and its consequent modes of representation discussed in *The Location of Culture* complicates key elements of *Earth*. Bhabha describes the stereotype as "an ambivalent mode of knowledge and power" and "a major discursive strategy"<sup>28</sup> that helps extend Singer's descriptions around melodramas in general. 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."<sup>29</sup> Recalling those scenes in *Earth* that appear as stereotypical of Holocaust films, we can see how they may function to produce that very sense of ambivalence in their incompleteness, dissatisfaction in their rendering, and overall lack as indicative of the stereotype as a discursive strategy of the film.

In fact, Bhabha 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*

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<sup>28</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge Press, 1994) 66..

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse.”<sup>30</sup> As Bhabha goes on to add, suggesting to our 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.”<sup>31</sup> 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 an individual of ‘hybrid identity’ in her position as a Canadian/Indian filmmaker) reappropriates the stereotypes of Western-produced Holocaust cinema to complicate the idea around the articulation of difference as Bhabha describes it. Indeed, 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.<sup>32</sup>

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 the film within the context of revealing how 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 something of 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* confronts viewers with the uneven process through which meaning and value is produced during periods of violence, trauma, and incomprehensible change.

Drawing on Mehta’s narrative strategies, another aspect beyond the stereotypical conventions of Holocaust trauma within *Earth* that I want to highlight, emerges with the racial commentary, jokes and juxtapositions continually iterated through the film. Bhabha argues that racial epithets “come to be seen as modes of differentiation, realized as multiple, cross-cutting determinations, polymorphorous 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

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Phillips.

hierarchization.<sup>33</sup> 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.”<sup>34</sup> The stereotypical elements of *Earth* merge somewhat with my previous discussion of 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 film is punctuated by the colonial discourses of racial stereotypes that emerge in everyday discussions, encounters, teasing, and joking. Second, the film’s various characters are caught up in the exchange of rumours and hearsay that grow out of the discourses of stereotype (one effect of anxious repeating). In fact the film begins with rumours about the Partition and ends with the rumours about the Ayah and what becomes of her. These episodes are similar again, I may add, to episodes in Holocaust films where rumours about the extermination camps and the people who were taken to them ran rampant.

We can identify, however, one key scene in *Earth* that works to unpack the sense of oversimplification of the political stakes of Partition while perhaps complicating the aesthetics of the spectator’s position.<sup>35</sup> Turning to the scene of Lenny’s parents’ dinner party near the very beginning of the film [figure 12], I want to draw attention to the intriguing camera work—the way that it roves around the room—and also to the many racial comments and juxtapositioning of the neutral Parsees situated between and refereeing the dispute between Mr. Singh and the Englishman. On its surface, there is something of 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 somewhat glib discussion of the various players in India’s coming partition.<sup>36</sup> Yet the camera and the way it moves is critical to this scene since it refuses to ‘fix’ on any individual until true conflict ensues. Therefore, the camera’s lack of fixity and the anxiety provoking sense it creates functions to break down and rupture the “simple” composition of the scene. Moreover, the point of fixity (when a real argument breaks the light banter) aligns with the moment when each individual character is finally framed by the camera and labeled with a particular stereotype. Mr. Singh becomes the militant and fanatical Sikh [figure 13] while the Englishman becomes the imposing and treacherous white man [figure 14]. Recalling Bhabha’s discussion of racial jokes, their function is to “[deny] the differences of the other but produces in its stead forms of authority and multiple belief that alienate the assumptions of ‘civil’ discourse.” Certainly, this outcome is clearly demonstrated in the temporary breakdown of civility in the scene.

Moreover, the function of rumour as an adjunct to the stereotype, underscores the sense of circulation and movement in the scene as the process of vacillation, indicative of the production of stereotypical identification, ensues. As Bhabha contends, rumour’s “performative power of circulation results in the contagious spreading, an almost

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<sup>33</sup> Bhabha, 67.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>35</sup> Bhabha’s ideas around the fetish are important here extending the conflict of pleasure/unpleasure, mastery/defence, absence/presence through a number of visual elements related to the dinner scene I will go on to discuss.

<sup>36</sup> It is notable too how Lenny and her brother, seated underneath the table, name and identify the characters according to profession (the gardener, the cook etc..) and not along simple racial and religious lines.

uncontrollable impulse to pass it on to another person... link[ing] it with panic.”<sup>37</sup> Once again, the moving camera works to draw out this sense of contagion against the mundane elements of the broader visual composition. But it is precisely this aspect of the scene that is so compelling, especially with respect to the specificity of Partition history. As Pandey describes, rumours, 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.<sup>38</sup>

Within *Earth*, the narrative framing of the film re-inscribes the function of a rumoured history through a child’s recollected story told in retrospect—a more fragile narrative that bears the stamp of time and possible embellishment— together with the film’s powerful climax where the forces of rumour can no longer be contained, resulting in the murder of Hasan by his one-time friend and the abduction (and probable rape) of Lenny’s nanny [figure 15]. 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, literature, and finally, film.

Therefore, the connection between melodrama and trauma in *Earth* is punctuated around elements of desiring to grasp, yet failing to fully comprehend, the enormity of certain types of Partition experience. This phenomenon is elucidated perhaps 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.”<sup>39</sup> 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 Domink 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* and *History and Memory after Auschwitz*]. It is in these texts that we find the notion of witnessing taken up by Gayatri Spivak, for example, in her case-study on the Rani of Simur.<sup>40</sup> 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 transferential relationship with the Rani of Simur... to be

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<sup>37</sup>Bhabha discusses rumour at some length on pages 200-203.

<sup>38</sup> Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 91.

<sup>39</sup> Kaplan.

<sup>40</sup> 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.

haunted by her slight ghost.”<sup>41</sup> This willingness to suspend the most rational aspects of history making and fact-finding, to actively and creatively engage with the past in a way that traces the incongruities and interruptions of narratives, underscores the kind of active relationship Spivak sets up with recalling the past. Importantly, *Earth* too is adapted from an existing and fraught narrative framework, “haunted” by a first person narrative account of witnessing told in Bapsi Sidhwa’s biographical story *Cracking India* (1990). This form of witnessing is, in turn, made self-reflexive through Deepa Mehta’s insertion of Sidhwa’s actual body into the final scene of the film, where Sidhwa plays herself in a kind of working through of her own grief by momentarily inhabiting the fictitious body of Lenny, reconfigured and transformed in Mehta’s adaptation [figure 16].

Such concerns for an ethical history, or a process of recalling the past, draw out LaCapra’s main concerns for attempting to understand and represent experiences of the Holocaust, versus positioning or sanctifying them beyond all representation. LaCapra has spent a great deal of energy critiquing 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 claims, move the specificity of the events to the realm of sanctification. Therefore, as Debarati Sanyal 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.<sup>42</sup>

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 the distinction between 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 be seen as foreclosing 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.<sup>43</sup> Mehta’s own position as second generation witness to Bapsi Sidhwa’s witnessing, together with the stories Mehta grew up hearing from relatives that survived Partition, is useful to consider in this context. Moreover, the fraught nature of Partition history as lived experience in present day India and Pakistan, the absences and losses that punctuate communication and interaction between them, were reinforced when the Pakistani authority refused to allow Mehta to film *Earth* in Lahore. 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

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<sup>41</sup>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.

<sup>42</sup> Debarati Sanyal, “Review of Dominick LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma*,” *SubStance* 31.2 (2002): 306.

<sup>43</sup> See Dominik LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Summer 1999): 696-727, for full discussion on this point.

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's position of witness is made 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 would 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 ultimately releases us from a cycle of perpetual retraumatization 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 ripping apart of her doll after witnessing the beating of a man [figure 17]—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. 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.<sup>44</sup> The notions of "the middle voice" and that of "empathic unsettlement"<sup>45</sup> thus emerge in LaCapra's work as vehicles for representing trauma. 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."<sup>46</sup> To counteract the excessive identification with trauma and victimization (key to my earlier discussion on 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, particularly those works that focus on the abduction and rape of women—the very drama around which *Earth* finds a moment of dramatic climax—there is an attempt to reveal how women's bodies can be made the contested ground, the very territory upon which notions of subjectivity, agency, and national imaginary 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*, the possibility for theorizing the gendered nature of subjectification and identity formation expands and underscores the terms of

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<sup>44</sup> Domink LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) 5.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

LaCapra's arguments about the "middle voice."<sup>47</sup> In turn, this scholarship provides the potential to further unpack the binaristic and hierarchical categories of victimization and trauma LaCapra argues are indicative of many Holocaust narratives. As Ambreen Hai argues in an essay that investigates the character of 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." It is these kinds of border regions and heterogeneous cultures that build up, bear the burden, and go on to survive the worst forms of violence.<sup>48</sup> In turn, 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.<sup>49</sup>

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."<sup>50</sup> In turn, 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 retraumatization.

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? I have argued through this paper that *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 around 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

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<sup>47</sup> 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.

<sup>48</sup> Ambreen Hai, "Border Work, Border Trouble: Postcolonial Feminism and the Ayah in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.2 (2000): 381. For other examinations of Sidhwa's novel in light of gender specific issues, see Jill Didur, "Cracking the Nation: Gender, Minorities, and Agency in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*." *Ariel* 29.3 (1998): 43-64; and Sangeeta Ray's chapter, "New Women, New Nations: Writing the Partition in Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and Sidhwa's *Cracking India*." in *En-Gendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 380.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*.



with the overall lack 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 rumour, and the problem of incommensurability (though, importantly not radical incommensurability) between nation states.

Perhaps more importantly, however, *Earth* and Mehta's representation of "India's holocaust" interjects 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 something of a middle voice and attempting to produce some form of empathic unsettlement in the narrative structure of the film. This unsettlement is facilitated through focus on the specifically human dimension around the partition of India, 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 complicates, 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.<sup>51</sup> In turn, *Earth*'s particular "vocabulary" responds in meaningful ways to Pandey's call for a "language of violence"—shared across racial, ethnic, and national identities.<sup>52</sup> A return to ethical concern, human understanding, and move towards healing lies at the heart of *Earth*'s engagement with the discourses of Holocaust trauma, but firmly within the context of allowing for specific histories, the breaking apart of binaries, and the recognition of culturally and historically specific accounts of experience.

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<sup>51</sup> Importantly, as Debarati Sanyal remarks in her review of *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, the return to aspects of humanism underscore key aspects of LaCapra's ongoing interest in writing on the Holocaust: "LaCapra also makes a provocative connection between historical and real violence, between the sacrificialism of Nazi ideology and critical thought which, paradoxically, seeks to undo the very conditions of possibility for this type of sacrificial violence. LaCapra criticizes certain strands of post-structuralist theory for their investment in aporia, lack and victimization. Such approaches collude with the very logic they seek to dismantle by replicating an "all-or-nothing logic" (72) that bears disquieting affinities with Nazi sacrificialism. The postmodern fear of reproducing the totalizing redemptions associated with Nazism, LaCapra suggests, has produced an equally questionable investment in an aporetic, abyssal thought that valorizes loss, victimization and melancholy as constant and constitutive features of subjectivity."

<sup>52</sup> The issue of language is taken up in the film in a far more literal sense through the particular uses of the English language and employment of various Indic languages. This is a point that deserves further exploration in support of *Earth*'s particular force as a widely released, international film.

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figure 1



figure 2

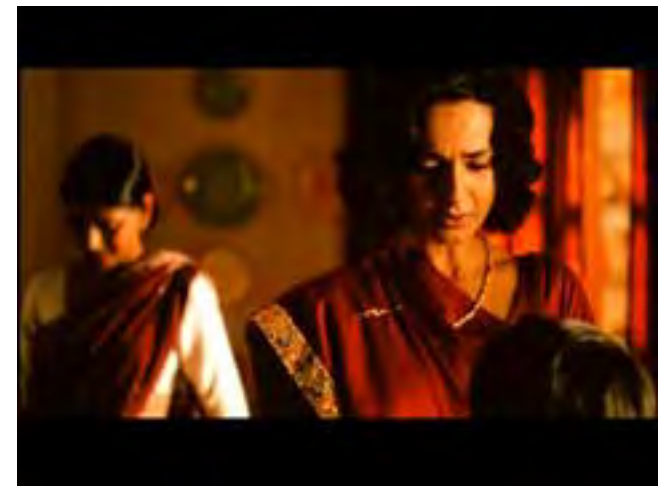


figure 3



figure 4



figure 5



figure 6



figure 7



figure 8

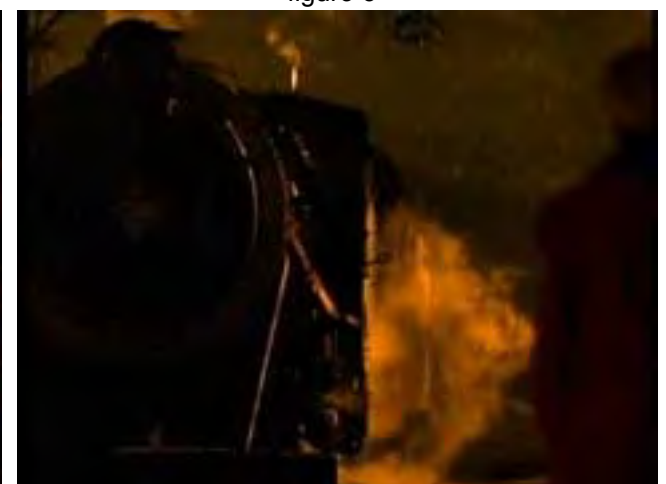


figure 9



figure 10



figure 11



figure 12



figure 13

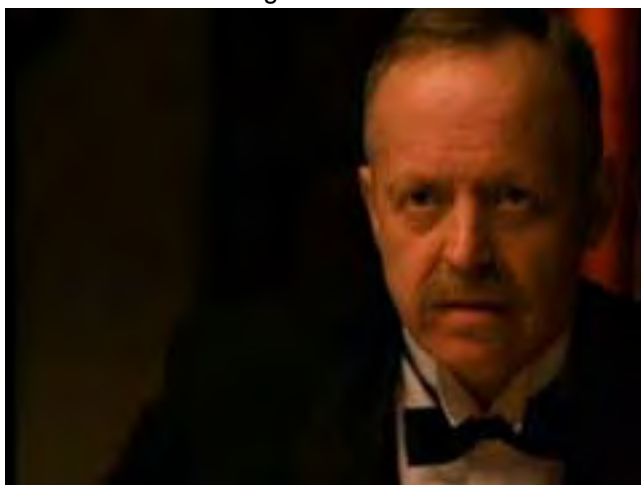


figure 14

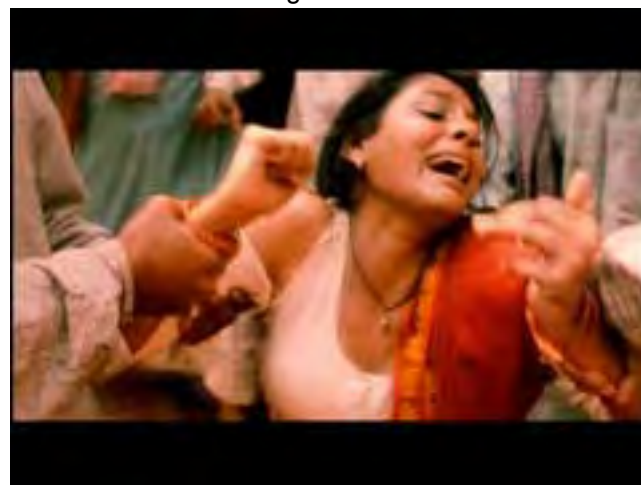


figure 15



figure 16



figure 17