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Violence, Traumatic Memories and Cinematic Representation of 1984

Manjot Kaur

Senior Research Fellow (UGC)

Dept. of English and Cultural Studies

Panjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract:

This present paper intends to overview and interrogates the salient aspects of screen memory including the celluloid depiction of traumatic remembrance. The vision of past and history can be drawn from diverse sources which becomes a 'transferential space', the space where readers and spectator can experience the events which they did not live through. They may not experience a meticulous repetition of the original event yet it fosters a profound insight into the event which is probably inaccessible. While recreating the past through mediated representation, readers and spectators then experience a memory that no one else ever had. The act of taking on these prosthetic memories changes their own subjectivities. Using the notion of 'prosthetic memory', the present paper would tend to critically analyse the cinematic text *Amu* and traumatic remembrance.

Keywords: Trauma, Prosthetic Memory, Subjective Camera and Violence.

The term 'memory' remains quintessentially useful in articulating the connections between the cultural, the social, the political, and between representation and social experience. Representational forms such as literary and cinematic frames of memory often represent a collage of contending memories and proffer the possibility of prosthetic memory of past. The images of the past and the recollected knowledge are sustained and conveyed by the performance. Hence remembering is an inherently generative process. It is selective performative and mediated by cultural and ritual performances, as well as by the written and spoken words. Memorials are those emotional spaces that embody emotions and are designed to evoke emotions and feelings in the viewers and participants. Nevertheless, memorials become a tool through which public understands the past, and eventually shape rather re-shape future. Nonetheless different modes of art influence our understanding of past in different ways. Artistic representation is an integral part of cultural remembrance; yet each mode of art involves both a revision of the original event and a unique comment on the tradition of remembrance itself. In the act of representing trauma, memory is the common denominator as it becomes a social technology that can connect representation and social expression. Subsequently, it becomes contested to study the myriad ways in which the film fosters the power to change the structure of memory.

The year 1984 and the decade that followed seems to have been unusually destructive in terms of the scale of violence and the suddenness with which it got unleashed throughout Punjab, India, and indeed beyond Indian shores. And when the historical events are violent and traumatic, the debate about accurate re-representation becomes particularly contested. On

June 31st, Mrs. Gandhi, the then prime minister of India, was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards and it was followed by three days massacre against Sikhs. That was the time when Sikh men were brutally killed, women were raped and children witnessed turbulent time period. The anti-Sikh riots of 1984 has always been portrayed and presented differently by different modes of art. Thirty years has been passed and no one has been punished; victims/widows have not been rehabilitated. No film had been made on the events of 1984 till 2005. Films like, *Hawayein*, '47 to 84' are also set against 1984 but they failed to display the real message. Film is the best way to represent traumatic memories/past events. Films are not productions for entertainment only, but also a tool that teaches and transmits ideas. While filming a mode of truth-telling, camera becomes a revolutionary tool. Film is also a part of social technology which often reminds us that pain and evil is the integral part of human existence. In films, mise-en-scenes bring victims' suffering near to us. The movement of the camera make us engaged with the pain of others.

Through 'Subjective Memory', the spectator not only visits the life of characters but also confronts the stark reality and nuances of anti-Sikh violence. Maurin Turim calls it 'Subjective Memory'- this has the double sense of the rendering of history as a subjective experience of a character in the fiction and the formation of the subject in the history as the viewer of the film identifying with functional characters positioned in a fictive social reality. Gilles Deleuze demonstrates that our virtual (filmic and photographic) images compete with our 'recollection images'—our memories of events not captured in film and video. His formulation of the film-image as a mobile assemblage (sometimes a frame, sometimes a shot, a sound, or the film as a whole) lends itself to this reading. Eventually both the original image and the contemporary image become distorted in a historical mirage and directly alter the public opinion and collective memory. The entire discussion of cinematic representation can be summed up in these two words: time and space. The concept of time-image is based on the notion that an image has the potential to show the whole idea of a narrative. This cinematic aspect of time can be read the way director makes use of cinematic techniques to throw light on a particular event and also in the manner in which he uses them to show atrocities through the lens of history and past.

With the indulgence of imagination, these mediated representations function as prosthesis between an individual and a historical narrative about the past. This implies the personal characteristic of prosthetic memory inflected by the reader's other experiences in the world, which is different from the collective memory. Collective memory can preserve the memory of lived experience but individual can attain the experience in one's own way. Sometimes, the provocative images of popular culture become so entangled with lived experience that it becomes quite difficult to make a distinction between lived experience and assimilated memory.

Films play an important role in the formation and re-formation of a nation's cultural memory. It is not merely museums or memorial sites which exercise the act of memorializing but art and literature also become tool to construct and retrieve memory. Film is art, and is therefore for free speech. But there are certain reasons why films have produced outrage in the past and

have been either banned or cut/edited. The film got ten awards including National and international awards. Although the film, *Amu*, is an adaptation of her own novel named *Amu*, but the novel didn't face any ban. Shonali Bose, an Indian author and director, directed *Amu* in year 2005. The film displays the darkest chapter of 1984 in Indian history, when over 10,000 Sikhs were massacred. The Censor Board gave the film an A certificate (which is an adult certificate) and later cleared it with six politically motivated cuts and few scenes/dialogues for specific reason. And a ten minute cut was suggested by censors including removal of all verbal references to the riots. And the reason was given that *why should young people know a history that is better buried and forgotten*. It foregrounds two important issues, first, the denial of justice for the victims and survivors of 1984 carnage against Sikhs and second, it re-examines the time period of year 1984 itself. Kaju, the protagonist, is the sole survivor and victim of same carnage.

Kaju's journey slowly reveals that her parents had not died in a malaria epidemic, as she had been told as a child. Facts are brought to light through her research as well as the stories told to her by those who lived through the violence. Each storyteller has his/her own perspective; some are willing to share what they know and others are not. This new information affects how Kaju views her personal history as well as the history of India. She also feels betrayed by Keya, her mother, and confronts her: "Mom, after everything you've taught me. Everything you've ever stood for. Since when is hiding something the right thing to do?" (Bose 88). Some of the scenes seem innocent enough but stare at you with a feeling of helplessness and dismay at what transpired during that nightmare. Kaju returns to India to search the essence of India through the eyes of ordinary men living in slums. She seeks to explore her roots/her identity, what actually motivates her to proceed in life. During her search, she comes to know that she is also a victim of 1984 anti-Sikh riots. Through internet videos and images, Kaju and Kabir got a good amount of information regarding the massacre that was widely reported and researched but the culprits are still unpunished. They started visiting slums and interacted with the widows in Trilokpuri. Kaju tries hard to gather her fragmented identity; she wants to know what happened to her parents. Kaju's voyage of self-discovery takes her from the charm of rural India to the harsh reality of the streets of New Delhi during the 1984 riots and reveals the mystery of her past in a searing climax. The ever present 'kirpan' (small dagger) - a symbol of Sikh defence seemed so timid and useless in those times. The cutting of a Sikh's hair in the train, by fellow travellers, only to prevent him from being killed, was a sad statement on the dreadful situations recurring even today 20 years later in the railways. Ministers, politicians and the police have been hand in glove during this is all the more evident. Balasz considers that many profound emotional experiences can never be expressed in words at all (318). Thus whatever has been articulated through the face and face expressions of Kaju and widows that can never be depicted through 'words'. Their wrinkled and frowned faces of widows reflect the seriousness and tragedy of their life. Kaju's yearning to know about her roots, the anxiety to know the truth - all aspects are vividly reflected through her face. All these various stages have been captured through close ups.

The flashback occurs at the point in the story in which Keya unfolds the truth about Kaju's parents. Flash back is used to relate the story in the film integrating the events at different junctures of time to form an organic whole. The medium shot showing the interaction of Kaju and Kabeer with Durga Mausi goes for a flashback revealing how the Sikhs were massacred. Trains were rampantly searched for the Sikhs. The narrative has been told through two cinematic techniques, first through the eye of camera/or subjective camera and secondly through the technique of flashbacks. This film employs creative storytelling techniques as well the use of flashbacks and narrative style and has portrayed a long period of time realistically. Flashbacks have been used most effectively, which complement the narrative style of this film. The flashbacks are given from the perspective of Keya. The Sikhs were brutally dragged and garlanded with tyres and lit on fire. Her interactions with Shanti Kumari reveal that the 20 years had passed and still no justice was granted to the victims. Mentioning the impact of violence heard or witnessed as child, Ellora Puri makes a point, "Somehow these stories which I just heard are much more visually etched in my mind, than the graphic videos that I have watched of the 1992 killings or the post- Godhra pogrom probably because as children our imaginations give us the scope to register things more starkly and intensely."

Bose hopes that her voice will expand the discourse surrounding the events of 1984 to include one aspect that often goes unnoticed – the role of Hindus who aided Sikhs during those violent times. The film is a fearless endeavour to confront past and address the issue of denial of justice. In a 102 minutes film, all issues cannot be addressed but it can put various questions into perspective. Kaju's journey symbolises an unstoppable journey to seek the truth. The infamy of 1984 cannot be buried or washed away. Victims and their tale of woes need to be addressed as they have been carrying on the fight for thirty years. Violence can be depicted better in art/serious cinema. Documentary can draw the attention of victims and people who know about this issue. Film tends to reach the widest audience possible. Film is crafted in such a way that it draws in anybody, who doesn't even have a relationship with 1984.

Even more curiously, the confusion between seeing and knowing is found and perceptions and sensations have been conflated in *Amu*. Cinematic spectatorship becomes an experience due to its experiential nature, especially on the spectator's engagement with the image. Landsberg refers to the research done by Herbert Blumer under the Payne Studies in which a group of researchers, mostly university psychologists and sociologists, did a research on the capacity of motion pictures to affect individual bodies and subjectivities of the audience. "Blumer's study suggested that the experience of the film might be as formative and powerful as other life experiences. What people see might affect them so significantly that the images would actually become part of their own archive of experiences." (Landsberg, 30) It could even affect the person so much that he or she can no longer distinguish cinematic memories from lived ones or the "prosthetic" and the "real." This is in accordance to Jean Baudrillard's notion of media and mediations, in which people's actual relationship to 'authentic experience' has become so mediated that it is no longer possible to distinguish between the 'real' and 'not real.' *Amu* steps back to show a collective memory and cultural trauma. It dialectically contrasts image with sound, past with present, and stasis with movement to set

up a thematic tension between our responsibility to remember and the impossibility of doing so, between memory and oblivion or denial.

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