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**“From Page to Screen: Partition, Memory and Cultural Translation in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* and Deepa Mehta’s *1947: Earth*”**

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**Abstract**

Partition literature occupies a significant space in South Asian literary and cultural studies, articulating the trauma, displacement, and fractured identities resulting from the 1947 division of the Indian subcontinent. This research paper proposes to examine the interrelationship between partition literature and its film adaptation through a comparative analysis of Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *Cracking India* (1991- US, 1992- India) originally published as *Ice Candy Man* (1988, England) and its cinematic adaptation *1947: Earth* (1998), directed by Deepa Mehta. Anchored in multidisciplinary approaches to language, literature, and cinema, the study explores how the literary narrative of the novel is translated into a cinematic narrative, with particular attention to narrative perspective, character representation, and thematic emphasis.

The paper will analyse the adaptive choices made during the transition from text to screen, examining additions, omissions, and reinterpretations necessitated by the medium of film. Employing Linda Hutcheon’s adaptation theory, which conceptualizes adaptation as both a process and a product, this study critically examines the ways in which the film negotiates fidelity to the source text, engages in intertextual dialogue, and reinterprets historical trauma for a broader audience. The research further investigates the aesthetic, cultural, and ethical dimensions of adaptation, examining how cinematic techniques such as framing, mise-en-scène, and soundscape contribute to the narrative’s emotional resonance. It will also investigate the critical and audience reception of both the novel and the film independently, highlighting how the visual medium enabled the literary source to reach a wider and more diverse audience beyond academic and literary circles. Special emphasis will be placed on *1947: Earth* being selected as India’s official entry for the 1999 Academy Awards in the ‘Best Foreign Language Film’ category, and how this international recognition contributed to renewed visibility and global engagement with Sidhwa’s novel.

The study concludes by arguing that novel-to-film adaptations function as mutually enriching cultural processes, where literature and cinema complement and uplift each other. Rather than positioning one medium as superior and the other secondary or inferior, the paper

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foregrounds adaptation as a dialogic space that enhances the thematic reach and cultural impact of both genres.

**Keywords:** Partition Literature; Film Adaptation; Literature and Cinema; Linda Hutcheon: Theory of Adaptation; Bapsi Sidhwa; *Cracking India*; Deepa Mehta; 1947: *Earth*; Narrative Adaptation; Cultural Memory; Trauma and Representation

### **Introduction:**

The relationship between literature and film has long occupied a central place in interdisciplinary humanities scholarship, particularly in the context of adaptation studies, where narrative, history, politics, and aesthetics intersect. Literature and cinema, though distinct in their formal structures and modes of expression, often engage in a dynamic dialogue that enables stories to transcend the boundaries of medium, language, and geography. This dialogic relationship becomes especially significant when the subject matter involves historical trauma, collective memory, and cultural identity. The Partition of India in the year 1947 stands as one of the most catastrophic events of the twentieth century, resulting in mass displacement, communal violence, and enduring psychological scars across generations. Writers and filmmakers have repeatedly returned to the Partition of India as a subject of their interest, seeking to articulate its horrors, silences, and unresolved legacies. Among the most compelling representations of Partition are Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* (1991- US, 1992- India) published by Milkweed Editions and its cinematic adaptation *1947: Earth*, directed by Deepa Mehta (1998), produced by Anne Masson and Deepa Mehta. Together, these works exemplify how literature and film can function as complementary narrative forms that enrich and amplify each other rather than existing in hierarchical opposition.

### **Literary Narrative of the Partition of India:**

Partition literature occupies a distinctive space within South Asian literary studies, as it attempts to narrate an event that resists complete representation due to its scale of violence and emotional devastation. Author and Scholar Urvashi Butalia in her book, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* states that the Partition of India in 1947 constituted one of the most profound episodes of mass displacement and violence in modern history. It resulted in the forced migration of nearly twelve million individuals, the loss of approximately one million lives, and the widespread violation, abduction and rape of women, alongside the fragmentation of families and the irreversible loss of homes and property. Despite the magnitude of this catastrophe, the dominant public discourse surrounding Partition has often suppressed or marginalized its traumatic and violent dimensions. In contrast to this, personal and private memories of Partition continue to circulate through oral histories, literary narratives, and cultural representations, indicating that the emotional and social consequences of the event persist long after its political

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resolution. Scholars such as Shoma A. Chatterji and Uma Maheswari Bhrugubanda have highlighted Mehta's use of visual symbolism, colour palette, and camera techniques to convey the novel's emotive intensity, while other Scholars such as Urvashi Butalia, as mentioned above and Gyanendra Pandey have emphasized that Partition narratives have often emerged from personal memories, oral histories, and fictional reconstructions rather than official historical records, which tend to obscure lived experiences. Within this tradition, Sidhwa's *Cracking India* stands out for its innovative narrative strategy and ethical engagement with violence. Originally published under the title *Ice Candy Man*, the novel recounts the events of Partition through the perspective of Lenny, a young Parsi girl living in Lahore. The choice of a child narrator allows Sidhwa to approach the violence of Partition obliquely, filtering historical catastrophe through innocence, curiosity, and partial understanding. Lenny's Parsi identity further positions her as a marginal observer—neither Hindu nor Muslim—thus enabling a critical distance from the communal binaries that dominate the political landscape of the novel.

Sidhwa's literary narrative is marked by its intimate focus on everyday life and interpersonal relationships, which gradually fracture under the pressure of political upheaval. Rather than foregrounding political leaders or nationalist rhetoric, the novel centres on domestic spaces, friendships, and informal social networks, revealing how communal ideologies infiltrate the most ordinary aspects of existence. Characters such as Ayah, the Ice-Candy-Man, Hassan, and the Masseur represent different facets of pre-Partition coexistence, where religious differences coexist with social intimacy. As Partition approaches, these relationships deteriorate, transforming affection into suspicion and desire into violence. Sidhwa's restrained prose and symbolic language allow the horror of events to emerge gradually, avoiding sensationalism while confronting readers with the moral collapse of society.

One of the most significant aspects of *Cracking India* is its feminist perspective on Partition violence. Scholars have consistently noted that women's bodies became sites of communal contestation during Partition, subjected to abduction, rape, and forced conversion. Sidhwa's portrayal of Ayah encapsulates this gendered violence, as she is simultaneously idealized, desired, and ultimately destroyed by the men who once protected her. Ayah's fate reflects the broader patriarchal logic that equates women with honour, territory, and community, rendering them expendable in moments of political crisis. By narrating this violence through Lenny's partial comprehension, Sidhwa exposes the ethical failure of adults and institutions without resorting to overt moralizing. The book's central theme is sexual awakening, but it also explores communal identity because the story takes place between 1943 and 1948, when India earned independence but was divided into two nations.

The literary strength of *Cracking India* lies in its ability to balance historical specificity with universal human emotions. While deeply rooted in the context of the

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Partition of India in 1947, the novel speaks to broader questions of memory, betrayal, and moral responsibility. This narrative complexity has contributed to the novel's wide academic reception and also to its inclusion in syllabi on postcolonial literature, trauma studies, and Partition narratives. However, the reach of literary texts often remains limited by linguistic, educational, and cultural barriers. It is in this context that cinematic adaptation assumes particular significance, offering the possibility of reaching audiences beyond the traditional readership of literary fiction.

### **Cinematic Narrative of the Partition of India:**

Deepa Mehta's *1947: Earth* represents a crucial moment in the transposition of Partition literature into cinematic form. Released in 1998 as part of Mehta's Elements Trilogy, the film adapts Sidhwa's novel while simultaneously reinterpreting it through the visual and auditory language of cinema. Adaptation studies scholars such as Linda Hutcheon argue that adaptations should not be evaluated solely in terms of fidelity to the source text but rather understood as creative works that engage in reinterpretation and transformation. From this perspective, *1947: Earth* functions not as a secondary or derivative text but as an autonomous cultural artifact shaped by its medium, historical moment, and intended audience.

Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory, articulated in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), provides a critical framework for examining the relationship between text and adaptation. Hutcheon rejects the rigid binary of fidelity versus betrayal, instead conceptualizing adaptation as a process of reinterpretation, audience negotiation, and cultural translation. According to Hutcheon, adaptations function as intertextual and intermedial engagements, revealing both the adaptive choices of creators and the interpretive expectations of audiences. This theoretical perspective is particularly apt for analysing *Cracking India* and *1947: Earth*, as both works navigate historical specificity, narrative perspective, and ethical representation within their respective mediums.

Linda Hutcheon conceptualizes adaptation as a multifaceted process that transcends mere replication. According to her framework, adaptation entails four principal dimensions: Process and Product: Adaptation is simultaneously a creative act and a tangible artifact. Mehta's *1947: Earth* exemplifies this duality, as it is a cinematic product derived from literary material yet bearing its own artistic identity. Transcultural and Intertextual Dialogue: Adaptations engage with source texts while addressing contemporary socio-cultural concerns. Mehta negotiates historical trauma, collective memory, and cinematic ethics to reinterpret Sidhwa's narrative for a pan-Indian and global audience.

Medium-Specific Constraints and Opportunities: Adaptation necessitates alterations in narrative strategy, pacing, and characterization due to the inherent differences between

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literature and film. Visual storytelling, temporal condensation, and performative interpretation constitute key adaptive techniques in Mehta's *1947: Earth*.

Audience Reception: Adaptations are shaped by, and in turn shape, audience expectations. Hutcheon emphasizes the dialogic relationship between source text, adaptation, and consumer, highlighting the interpretive flexibility inherent in cross-media translation. From the perspective of reception, Hutcheon argues, 'audiences engage with adaptations as texts, layered with traces of original, experienced through the memory of prior works that resonates through repetition with variation' (Hutcheon cited in Binnor et al: 2025).

Hutcheon's theory foregrounds the adaptive process as an interpretive and creative negotiation rather than a hierarchical assessment of fidelity, providing a robust framework for examining the intermedial transformation of *Cracking India* into *1947: Earth*.

#### **Comparative analysis of the Literary Narrative and its Cinematic Adaptation of the Partition of India:**

The cinematic narrative of *1947: Earth* retains the central plot and characters of *Cracking India* but alters narrative emphasis to suit the demands of visual storytelling. While the novel relies heavily on Lenny's retrospective narration, the film reduces her role as an explicit narrative voice, instead employing visual cues, dialogue, and performance to convey meaning. This shift reflects a fundamental difference between literary and cinematic narration: where literature often privileges interiority and reflection, cinema emphasizes immediacy, embodiment, and spectacle. Mehta's film foregrounds emotional intensity through close-ups, sound design, and spatial composition, creating a visceral experience that contrasts with the novel's restrained tone.

One of the most striking changes in the adaptation is the heightened focus on the transformation of the character of Ice-Candy-Man. In the novel, his descent into fanaticism is filtered through Lenny's limited understanding, rendering it gradual and ambiguous. The film, however, presents this transformation more explicitly, framing him as a tragic figure consumed by grief, rage, and communal hatred. This cinematic choice reflects Mehta's broader political critique of how ordinary individuals become agents of violence under the influence of nationalist ideologies. By visualizing riots, trains of corpses, and mob violence, *1947: Earth* confronts viewers with the physical realities of Partition in ways that the novel only implies.

As we read on the official theatrical release poster of the film, "An Epic Romance, Set Against The Blood Stained Canvas Of Partition", the representation of violence in the film has been a subject of critical debate. Some critics argue that the graphic depiction of brutality risks sensationalizing trauma, while others contend that such representations are necessary to counter historical amnesia. From a trauma studies perspective, as articulated by Cathy Caruth, the repetition and visual confrontation of traumatic events can serve as a form of witnessing, forcing audiences to acknowledge histories that resist closure. In this sense,

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Mehta's cinematic approach complements Sidhwa's literary restraint, offering an alternative mode of engagement with the same historical material.

The adaptation process inevitably involves condensation, omission, and reconfiguration. Several subplots present in *Cracking India* are minimized or excluded in *1947: Earth*, reflecting the temporal constraints of film. The complexity of Lenny's interior reflections is partially sacrificed in favour of external action and dialogue. However, these changes should not be understood as losses but as transformations necessitated by medium specificity. As Robert Stam notes, adaptations are shaped by economic, ideological, and aesthetic considerations, and their differences from source texts often reveal new interpretive possibilities.

Audience reception plays a crucial role in understanding the cultural impact of both the novel and the film. *Cracking India* was widely praised upon publication for its bold narrative voice and feminist critique of Partition. Reviewers and scholars highlighted Sidhwa's ability to humanize historical trauma without diminishing its gravity. The novel has since become a canonical text within Partition literature, studied alongside works by Khushwant Singh, Saadat Hasan Manto, and Bhisham Sahni. Its reception, however, remained largely within literary and academic circles, limiting its exposure to broader audiences.

In contrast, *1947: Earth* reached a more diverse and international audience through film festivals, theatrical releases, and later home media. The film's visual language transcended linguistic barriers, making the story accessible to viewers unfamiliar with South Asian history or English-language literature. While reception varied across cultural contexts, the film generated significant discussion about religious nationalism, gendered violence, and historical responsibility. Importantly, the film prompted renewed interest in Sidhwa's novel, leading to reprints and increased academic engagement. This phenomenon illustrates how film adaptations can function as conduits that extend the life and reach of literary texts.

The selection of *1947: Earth* as India's official entry for the 72nd Academy Awards in the 'Best Foreign Language Film' category marked a significant moment in the transnational circulation of Partition narratives. Although the film did not secure a nomination, its selection itself signalled institutional recognition of its artistic and political significance. International attention to the film brought renewed visibility to its literary source, positioning *Cracking India* within global conversations about trauma, memory, and postcolonial identity. Such recognition underscores the role of cinema as a powerful medium for cultural diplomacy and historical representation.

The Academy Awards entry also highlights the broader implications of adaptation for literary prestige and cultural memory. When a film adaptation gains international

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recognition, it often reshapes the reception of the source text, inviting new interpretations and audiences. In the case of *Cracking India*, the film's visibility contributed to its status as a key Partition narrative, reinforcing its relevance in contemporary discussions of nationalism and communalism. This reciprocal relationship challenges the assumption that adaptations diminish the value of literary originals, demonstrating instead how they can enhance and sustain literary legacies.

At a theoretical level, the relationship between *Cracking India* and *1947: Earth* exemplifies the core principles of adaptation studies, which reject hierarchical distinctions between "original" and "copy." Linda Hutcheon emphasizes that adaptations are acts of both interpretation and creation, shaped by the adapter's vision and the audience's expectations. Mehta's film does not seek to replicate Sidhwa's novel but to reimagine it through cinematic language, addressing different emotional registers and ethical questions. This process of reinterpretation enriches both the literary text and its cinematic counterpart, inviting comparative analysis rather than evaluative judgment.

The interdisciplinary significance of this case study lies in its demonstration of how literature and film engage collaboratively in the construction of cultural memory. Literature offers depth, nuance, and interiority, enabling readers to reflect on historical events at their own pace. Film, on the other hand, provides immediacy, sensory impact, and collective viewing experiences that can foster emotional engagement and public discourse. Together, they create a multifaceted representation of Partition that neither medium could achieve alone.

In the broader context of language and literature studies, the adaptation of *Cracking India* into *1947: Earth* illustrates how narratives migrate across forms, languages, and audiences. This migration challenges rigid disciplinary boundaries, encouraging scholars to adopt multidisciplinary approaches that integrate literary analysis, film theory, history, and cultural studies. Such approaches are particularly valuable in examining events like Partition, which demand ethical sensitivity and representational innovation.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the transformation of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* into Deepa Mehta's *1947: Earth* exemplifies the productive interplay between literature and film within the domain of Partition narratives. Rather than competing for cultural authority, the novel and the film engage in a complementary relationship that amplifies their respective strengths. The novel provides narrative depth and moral complexity, while the film offers visual immediacy and expanded reach. Through adaptation, both genres contribute to the preservation and reinterpretation of historical memory, demonstrating that literature and cinema are not hierarchical forms but interconnected modes of storytelling that enrich and uplift each other. By embracing adaptation as a creative dialogue rather than a measure of

fidelity, scholars and audiences alike can appreciate the transformative potential of narratives that move from page to screen.

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