

Bleeding Boundaries

Mapping the Destabilization of Territorial Regimes in Anup Singh's Partition film

Qissa: A Tale of a Lonely Ghost

Abstract

In line with Hamid Naficy's identification of an emergent accented diasporic cinema, this study investigates an interstitial cinematic production existing apart from mainstream Bollywood. The paper identifies a distinct diasporic consciousness animating the independent film-maker Anup Singh's *Qissa: A Tale of a Lonely Ghost*, a recently co-produced Punjabi film revisiting the Punjab Partition of 1947.

Anup Singh's history traverses three continents; a dispersal from Pakistan all the way to Africa in the wake of the 1947 Partition; a later political expulsion from Africa to India under Idi Amin's regime; and more recently a movement towards Europe.

In *Qissa*, the Sikh patriarch Umber Singh strives to re-root himself in the newly carved up Indian Territory. For him a crucial aspect of this re-rooting is the birth of a male heir. In the delirious scramble for a son, he negates the birth of his youngest daughter by imposing a masculine identity upon her. However, this struggle of re-territorialization, be it on national ground or on the terrain of gender subjectivity is never allowed successful completion in the film. It is in this unsettlement of identity that the text's tragedy as well as subversion lies.

Utilizing the tools from Diaspora, Deleuzian and Gender studies, the paper attempts to explore the displacement that territorial regimes of national and gender identity are subjected to in the text.

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Partition and its Legacy

Philosopher and social anthropologist Ernest Andre Gellner presents two distinct visions of the world map. The pre-national cartography, he likens to a painting by Kokoschka. "The riot of diverse points of color is such that no clear pattern can be discerned in any detail" (as cited in Malkki 1992: 26). On the other hand, the map of the modern world according to him is more like a painting by Modigliani. "There is very little shading; neat flat surfaces are clearly separated from each other, it is generally plain where one begins and another ends, and there is little if any ambiguity or overlap" (26). Thus according to Gellner the modern map of nations conceptually disallows the existence of any "fuzzy spaces" and "bleeding boundaries" (26).

In the case of India too, at the very eve of the birth of yet another Modiglian-esque nation, this very enterprise of nation building caused a violent crack along the North-western and Eastern boundaries of India. The Partition of 1947 brought with it the horror of bleeding and burning borders. Not only was it a horrific manifestation of communal violence, loot and rape, it was essentially a large scale exodus, characterized by multiple cross migrations. Almost 10-15 million people were dispersed and displaced across newly erected frontiers.

The study of the Partition has had a long and varied journey in the Indian subcontinent. But according to Rosemary George, these explorations of the Partition largely remained rooted in the framework of the nation. As an alternate mode of reading Partition literature and history, she argues for the undervalued rubric of the diasporic lens. She says "the birth of two nations in this case cannot be separated from the birth of the two diasporas, which are wrenched from one home to a more 'fitting' home... however, critical discourses on the national and on the diasporic proceed as if the two were diametrically opposite objects of study." She argues, "that the two are intimately intertwined and that it would be productive to bring the diasporic privileging of mobility, travel, memory, split affiliations, and so on, to bear on the hallowed ground of national discourses because it reveals the scaffolding on which the national is raised" (George 2007: 140).

Keeping in mind this new epistemological possibility entering the discourse of both History in general and Partition Studies in particular, this study engages with *Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost*, a Post-Partition cinematic text by the diasporic film-maker Anup Singh. The narrative

seemingly grounded in the nation, dealing with its emergence and struggles, is in fact animated by a diasporic consciousness. This study seeks to explore how this liminal energy allows a rather subversive de-stabilization of territorial regimes of power in the film.

Resurrecting the Author

Anup Singh, a film-maker of Indian origin is currently settled in Geneva, Switzerland. However, both his roots and routes follow an itinerant graph. He was born and brought up in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, in East Africa. His grandfather was rendered a refugee after the Partition and was compelled to chart his way to Tanzania for sustenance.¹

Time and again, in his interviews Singh credits a large part of his filmic endeavors to the various stories of the past, told and re-told around him in his early days. Providing a glimpse of the displaced community he found himself plugged into as a young boy, he says, "I grew up in Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania where many families living around us had been uprooted from distant lands and had innumerable melancholic tales to tell. Those stories have never left me... My grandfather, for instance, all that had been left to him, all that he could call his own, were his stories. He was one of the millions of refugees created by the 1947 partition of India. For people like him, for those who were displaced, for their children and grandchildren, stories are a link to lost forefathers, lost fragrances of hills and rivers and fields, lost homes and countries. Stories are all that are left to them to link them to a family or a community. These stories were everywhere in my childhood" (Singh 2015).

While the past was whispered to him through these bygone tales, Singh found himself being pushed into a large and forced exodus as a teenager. In the wake of African decolonization in the early 1960s and an upsurge of Africanization, the position of the Indian community residing in various parts of East Africa for generations, was put into peril. The military coup by Idi Amin in Uganda in the early 1970s caused a grave crisis for the Asian community as a whole. Vassanji writes, that even in Tanzania, in spite of Nyerere's enlightened politics and socialism, Idi Amin's scare, drove out many Asians (Vassanji 2015). Recalling this monumental journey from Dar-es-Salaam to Bombay Singh says, "That was my first harrowing journey into homelessness, what has now become a life-long journey of a refugee" (Singh 2015).

¹ We must keep in mind, that there existed in many parts of East Africa, including Tanzania, a large and rather old community of Indians. Writer M.G. Vassanji lists the sheer diversity of the various Indian communities that could be found in East Africa, namely "the Bhatias and Khojas, Jains, Shahs, Patels, Lohanas, Sikhs, Bohras, Memons, Kumbhads and others" (Vassanji 2015).

Many decades later we see the haunting tales of Partition, great journeys and border-crossings power Singh's own creative voice. His work seems to carry the traces of a unique history of displacement, mobility and fluidity.

Strategic Interruption of Re-territorialization

Qissa takes the form of a tragic modern legend narrated by the grief-stricken ghost of Umber Singh who appears in the preface of the film. Caught on the wrong side of the border engraved by political cartographers, the Sikh patriarch Umber, his wife Mehar, and their young daughters are compelled to abandon home and trudge across in search of a new one. This traumatic de-homing of the refugee protagonist Umber translates into a renewed desire for territorial re-grounding. For Umber the ultimate re-grounding is pegged to the birth of a son. He believes that his uprooting from a territorialized and arborescent ancestry can be undone only by a re-rooting through a further male genealogical line.

Having sired one daughter after another, his re-territorializing² impulse reaches such a delirious stage, that he imposes a masculine identity onto his youngest daughter and brings her up as his sole male heir – Kunwar (prince). This charade takes an even darker turn when Umber forces a marriage between Kunwar and the young gypsy girl Neeli. The honest friendship and attraction that erupts between Kunwar and Neeli is a refreshing phase in the film. However, the forced constriction of their bond by Umber and his later attempt to rape Neeli, all in the scramble for a son, propels the story into a sinister and nightmarish end.

In the preface, Umber addresses the absent Neeli and laments, “How many times must I tell you this tale again?” (*Qissa* 2015). It is a story perhaps told and retold numerous times over, haunting a community for ages. Moreover, Umber not only narrates his tragic tale again and again, but lives it endlessly too; the tale of a repetitive and ceaseless displacement.

While the film has a purgatorial quality and a sense of being trapped in a state of displacement, the film is also infused with subversive energies that destabilize the stronghold of power structures. The strategy employed to do this is a constant interruption of the cycle of re-territorialization of power and identity. This interruption operates at two simultaneous levels. One is at the national and geo-political ground, due to which Umber's re-homing constantly eludes him. The other more prominent site to examine is the seemingly naturalized ground of the gendered subjectivity. It is Kunwar's corporeal and psychic subjectivity that embodies an embattled territory. Thus, in *Qissa* we witness a stubborn thwarting of both these territorial re-groundings which in turn reveals the

² In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York, 1977) Deleuze and Guattari introduce the terms territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization, terms which may be defined as the creation and perpetuation of a cultural space, the dissolution of that space, its recreation. Codification, decodification, and recodification can serve roughly as synonyms.

fault lines of territorial regimes. This dialectic of territorialization and de-territorialization charges the driving force of the film.

Brief Territorial Anomaly

In the first segment we are transported to a space annotated as “Punjab: Pakistan Territory”. This labelling indicates that the process of nationalistic and communal re-territorialization has already begun at the level of political cartographies. However, what we encounter is a space peopled by Sikh men (and later even women and children) unhomed and scattered across a dark and uncounted landscape. The Sikh community on the ‘wrong side’ of the border becomes in *Qissa*, a glaring aberration to the new “categorical order of nation-states” (Malkki 1992: 34). The film chooses to open the tale with an anxiety-ridden space, the in-between, de-territorialized fissure in a newly and intensely national and territorial order.

It is at this point that Umber enters the space dragging the corpse of a Muslim man that he has killed in combat. When a village elder warns Umber about the cursing of their home-village due to the Muslim man’s corpse, a straight-faced Umber replies, “It is not our village anymore” (*Qissa* 2015). When the elder evokes their religious morality, Umber says decisively, “We are nothing now”. Thus, at a point in history when territorial and communal identities are being re-constructed emphasized Umber articulates an abandoning of claim to any such uncertain trappings of identity. This de-territorializing of self however has a severely desiccated quality.

A coalescing of the self and the other is also hinted at in the film which defies the exclusionary nationalistic rhetoric. Umber occupies the position of both the victim as well as the perpetrator. Throughout the section located in the Pakistan territory, the specter of violence that is manifest is not an Other-inflicted violence, but a self-inflicted one. Thus, in the film, instead of seeing any physical Other attacking and dismantling Umber’s home, we see him wrecking it himself; smashing the contents of his home and poisoning the well in his own courtyard. At this point his words and actions seem to be operating in a binary us v/s them rhetoric. However the film undercuts this and underlines the irrevocable interrelation between the self and the other. The ominous well that he flings his enemy into, disconnecting it from his geographic and psychic identity, continues to haunt and poison Umber’s new home and his new life across the border too.

Illusive Re-grounding

When we enter “Punjab: Indian Territory” we witness the fall of a large withered tree in the middle of a forest followed by a shrill chirping of the scattered birds. At the base of this tree, two men stand holding the two ends of a large saw that has amputated the tree. Umber’s voiceover soon embeds this image into a metaphor. He says, “The Partition had scattered us like birds in a storm”. This quintessential metaphor for a displaced people is quite evident, but on the other hand it can

also be seen as an attempt at dismantling what Deleuze and Guattari theorized as arborescent systems of thought and belonging.³

A centralized, hierarchical and closed structure of allegiance is what defines the twin frameworks of the family and the nation in *Qissa*. These structures however, are never permitted a smooth and comfortable stronghold and are marked by rhizomatic and de-territorializing lines of flight. Following the tree-fall, there is a long shot of the forest. The frame is marked by the stationary, vertical lines of the tree trunks. In contrast to the permanence of these rooted structures, Umber and his lumberjack men appear as mobile figures walking through the bushy foliage in the lower part of the frame. They are a scattered lot charting a zigzag path along this terrain frequently appearing and disappearing behind the shrubbery. Umber's voiceover asserts, "It took me four years to get back on my feet" (*Qissa* 2015). Though there is an assertion of regaining of ground, the shot visually undercuts Umber's claim. In this opening sequence of a re-territorialized new nation, Umber's presence adds an almost rhizomatic movement amongst fixed arborescent structures of belonging.

Soon Umber himself becomes a stationary presence in this locale. He seats himself on a chair that has been procured from the homes of those who fled to Pakistan. This kind of self-throning of Umber in the new territory, certainly speaks of his re-gained socio-economic powers. However there is a stark juxtaposition between the large forest with its organically rooted entities and the contrived rooting of Umber on a maligned Partition relic. Here onwards, we find Umber frequently involved in erecting and expanding his new home in size and contents but it undergoes repeated events of destruction and collapse.

The Molecular Gender Terrain

In the patriarchal framework, particularly an Indian one, the masculine represents territorial fixity, settlement and productivity as opposed to the feminine, who from her very birth is regarded as a transitory entity destined to travel to a different home. Thus, for the displaced Umber, who has lost all centralized scaffolds of power and identity, the obsession with the male heir becomes paramount.

And hence we witness through the film that the territorial displacement of the father becomes inscribed on to the corporeal ground for Kunwar. The territorial and divisive nature of power that disenfranchised Umber from a stable sense of identity, is bequeathed to Kunwar at the level of his gender identity. While Umber holds a somewhat indeterminate position in the new national order, Kunwar becomes a refugee in his own body. While the national re-ordering took place at the behest

³ The common conception of nationality according to Malkki, is that of a "grand genealogical tree" (as cited in Malkki 1992: 31). Such a conception reflects a "sedentary metaphysics" that... reaffirms the segmentation of the world into prismatic, mutually exclusive units of "world order" (28).

of the colonial as well as the two national power centers, the re-territorialization of Kunwar is orchestrated by the family patriarch.

The patriarchal force that we see embodied in Umber reaches such a degree of distortion that it ruthlessly blots out the female child to furnish the more desired masculine subject. *Qissa* visualizes this process of gendering and thus the concept of gender is itself deconstructed and denaturalized.

The first stage of this subjectification occurs right at the moment of Kunwar's birth. Umber is an intruder in the birthing chamber. He takes the infant over from the midwife as soon as he hears the child's first cry and exclaims, "Look, Mehar, a son has come to our house" (*Qissa* 2015). "My son, my son" is his repetitive cry of joy. In this intervention, Umber imposes a name onto the infant's body. This naming is artificially derived from his own desire. It is an attempt to project a coherent, unified and privileged identity that is regarded to be lacking in the female infant. Here in this birthing chamber, it seems as if, it is Umber who has borne a son for himself.

Following this initial labeling, we witness a continued and repetitive reinforcement of Kunwar's masculinity. At a young age, when Kunwar comes crying to his father because his sisters snatch his kite-spool, Umber sternly reprimands his unmanly behavior. He bellows at Kunwar, "I don't ever want to see you crying like a girl! Be a man and get it back". Thus, not only is the naming of the body enough, but the accompanying behavioral codes prescribed by a normative masculinity are to be followed. And any sign of perceived femininity is condemned. Kunwar is also made aware of the violent and hierarchical duality between the genders. When Umber assaults all his daughters as punishment for letting his son get wounded, Kunwar becomes an uncomfortable witness. He finds himself boxed into one faction of the gender binary.

To instill into Kunwar's lean and lithe body the strength and toughness desired in a man, Umber invites the village wrestler to become Kunwar's trainer. This interfering hand ready to mold and discipline the young body becomes representative of the "regulatory mechanisms through which "subjects" are produced and maintained" (Butler 1997: 32). As Kunwar squirms under the inspecting hand of the wrestler, Umber offers to take Kunwar on a hunt and places a rifle in his hands. These external masculine symbols thrust upon him serve to arouse and shape Kunwar's aspirations towards mastering a normative masculine identity.

In the following shot, we see the young Kunwar obediently exercising under the supervision of the wrestler. The repetitive rhythm of the exercise that Kunwar is subjected to emphasizes that the process of gendering "is not a singular act, but a repetition and ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of the body" (Butler 2010: xv).

The tenacity of this instilled rhythm continues even after Kunwar kills his father and escapes with Neeli from the patriarch's house. In their new refuge, Neeli makes him put on a pair of her clothes and tries to demonstrate her femininity for Kunwar to perhaps recognize it and embody it himself. However, the recovery of a natural essence of womanhood is not possible for him. He says, "When I put on women's clothes, it feels like scorpions are crawling all over my body. I no longer know

who I am”. And after this night of failed recovery of his womanhood, he wakes up in his usual male attire and performs the same exercise ritual he has been performing since he was a child. This time, however, his performance of gender is entirely internalized and self-supervised.

In *Qissa*, not only is the masculine identity seen as an external imposition driven by patriarchy, the gendering of femininity is also briefly articulated in its performative form. Neeli attempts to re-territorialize Kunwar into the feminine fold, by making use of external, cosmetic expressions of femininity. Just like Umber utilized masculinist symbols like the turban, the rifle and the hunt, Neeli uses the feminine costume, body language and gestures to re-socialize Kunwar. Thus, in Singh’s film, one gets a sense that “gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part without one’s knowing and without one’s willing, but not automatic or mechanical” (Butler 2004: 1).

De-territorializing Desire

The repetitive configuration of Kunwar’s body and subjectivity could be seen as a form of violent discursive re-territorialization. However, as we have noted before, this process of re-territorialization is never allowed to be completely successful. The problematic that haunts the film is an agony of displacement, of the impossibility of territorial and discursive settlement. This is where both its tragedy and subversion lies. While Kunwar’s codification seems to be highly overpowering and enveloping, it is punctured time and again.

The scene of Kunwar’s birth ends with Umber’s repetitive cajoling address to his new born son. This resounding address gains the ominous effect of an interpellation, a hailing that demands the production of the desired subject. While, Umber actively spurs Kunwar’s desire towards the masculinity he represents, there is a parallel but softer call that pulls Kunwar in its direction. Just like Kunwar encounters his father bathing and is offered a coveted invitation into that domain, he stumbles upon an almost parallel scene where he sees his mother bathing. This encounter is not characterized by any authoritarian hailing. It occurs as an accident and the mother is completely unaware of Kunwar’s presence. And here Kunwar is confronted by a strange desire for and identification with his mother’s body.

We keep seeing Kunwar engaged in a Lacanian mirror-gazing. Ideally, the function of the mirror stage is for the infant to recognize the self as an independent, unified and coherent entity. However, Kunwar’s constant mirror-gazing never produces a vision of coherence for him. He oscillates between the masculine and feminine images and finds complete self-identification in neither. As a young child, after having accidentally confronted the vision of his mother’s bare body, Kunwar attempts to experiment with the feminine garb. Dressed like a girl, he gazes longingly at the mirror, perhaps hoping for some kind of self-recognition. Another such mirror-gazing shot occurs right after Kunwar’s turban ceremony. This time, it is the image of a turbaned Sikh man. This too becomes an intense moment of indeterminacy where we find Kunwar looking for himself in a

mirror that reflects only hollow and estranged gender facades. Thus, we see, while subjected to Umber's consistent masculinist interpellation, Kunwar's identity never achieves a stable state. Instead, it is an identity highly torn and ungrounded from within.

It is finally Kunwar's desire for Neeli and the relationship that emerges between them, which becomes a potent line of flight for him and for the film. So far we have seen, that it is Umber's desire that has been shaping the narrative and the trajectories of the various characters. Kunwar too possesses and displays desires but these wander out of the frameworks contrived by Umber. Deleuze and Guattari in their work on desire, make a distinction between two kinds of "social libidinal investment". One is "the paranoid, reactionary and fascizing pole" and the other is a schizoid revolutionary pole" (as cited in Patton 2000: 70). While the former aims at "integration and territorialization" the latter spurs "decoded and de-territorialized flows" (Patton 2000: 70). Umber and Kunwar's desires seem to be operating across these two poles. While Umber's desire fuels the construction of a centralized, stable and productive male subject, Kunwar's wayward desires diffuse such a construction by desiring unapproved identifications and interactions.

The desire that erupts between Kunwar and Neeli emerges in a spontaneous fashion. From the point of view of their community, their relationship adheres to the societal norm. However, for the audience witnessing the growing bond between the two biological women, it becomes charged with revolutionary dimensions. Initially for Neeli too, her attraction towards Kunwar seems to be a legitimate heteronormative one. However, she confesses later, in a state of bewilderment, of the mysterious nature of her love for Kunwar, "It was all there. I just never saw it. Your face...your eyes...I fell in love with a woman" And Kunwar too echoes the absurdity of his desire. It becomes hard to neatly categorize their desire for each other into either a heteronormative or a homoerotic category. It is a desire that is inexplicable even to themselves.

This relationship is certainly transgressive by way of both its participants being biological women, but it also crosses other boundaries. Neeli belongs to a clan of gypsies who sing, dance and perform at auspicious occasions. Her community is frequently referred to as a tribe and has a collective social existence. In contrast Umber has gained a settled and individuated bourgeois respectability. The nomadic wandering quality that Neeli and her community represents is distinct from Umber and Kunwar's sense of displacement and exile. Thus, for Kunwar, the bond with Neeli becomes an opportunity of a line of flight from his father's rigid structures. Through this relationship Kunwar is not particularly able to find his true self, but it allows Kunwar a certain agency that he has been denied all through, hidden under the shadow of his father.

However, the tenacity of Umber's fiercely patriarchal and territorializing desire manages to devour the liminal figure of Kunwar. In a nightmarish turn of events, Umber's ominous man-ghost figure, finally sucks Kunwar's being into himself, like a sinister folkloric specter. This devouring shot is then followed by a long shot, where we behold a large desert-like expanse. The distant figure of Umber, the ghost, is seen kneeling at the edge of a small pool of water. To the eye, he keeps shape-shifting into multiple forms. Sometimes appearing some-what human, sometimes almost

crouching like a mythical beast, Umber's identity by now becomes a strange admixture of indeterminacies. By the end of this scene, he seems to be harboring within him both Umber and Kunwar, man and woman, human and specter. And even though he attempts, like in the beginning of the film, to start his life afresh, to build a new house from scratch, to re-organize a productive familial unit with Neeli, this futile and oppressive territorial pattern is rejected by Neeli's mute suicide. Neeli's silent jump into what is eerily reminiscent of the well, gets tied to that very first primal scene of violence we witness early in the film. And it is to that old domestic well in Pakistan, into which Umber had flung his Muslim victim, that he carries Neeli's corpse too. Be it the iconic colonial massacre of the Jallianwala Bagh of 1919, or the communal horrors of the Partition of 1947 itself, where the well was both murderously poisoned for the Other as well as used for suicide, the well becomes a stubborn symbol of a historically repetitive tragedy inflicting the people of Punjab,

Qissa's cyclic narrative form, accentuates a trapped purgatorial state. What echoes long after the end of the film, are the long and slow shots of Umber, carrying the burden of a corpse he himself has pushed to death, and oscillating back and forth between the two fixed territorial pegs of modern nationhood. The spirit of this displaced subject then is grounded in neither one nor the other, but wanders in the borders and routes between them.

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As a text that emerged almost half a century after the event, as well as from a far-flung diasporic descendent of this old rupture, the Partition operates at an ideological level, as a fundamental and haunting motif of displacement, de-homing and diaspora. And thus by mobilizing this event, the text seems to not only re-evaluate a sub-continent's troubled history, but also to re-evaluate an entire territorial metaphysics that dominates our social and psychic order.

Primary Source:

Qissa – The Tale of a Lonely Ghost. (2015). Dir. Anup Singh. Heimatfilm, National Film Development Corporation of India, Augustus Film, Cine-Sud Promotion, ZDF-Das Kleine Fernsehspiel, Arte.. Film.

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