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A Study of Nationalism through Collective Memory of Transgenerational Trauma and Resilience in Indian Cinema *

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of Indian cinematic representation of transgenerational memory of trauma and resilience of the freedom fighters in shaping nationalism. Drawing theories from memory studies, the paper examines how films serve as prosthetic memory, recreating the collective trauma of colonial rule and the resilience of freedom fighters as a unifying factor for a new generation. By analyzing select films from Hindi, Telugu, and Tamil cinema, this study investigates how the trauma of the independence movement, though not directly experienced by the second and third generations, remains potent in the cultural memory of the nation. In this context, cinema emerges as a powerful tool for the cultivation of nationalism and patriotism, shaping the national identity of young Indians today. The paper concludes that the portrayal of trauma and resilience in films play a crucial role in sustaining the narrative of India's struggle for independence and reinforcing its collective memory, fostering a sense of unity and pride.

Keywords: trauma, resilience, memory, prosthetic, freedom struggle, nationalism

Introduction

It is observed that collective memory, trauma, and nationalism of a nation are powerfully interlinked, and it is essential to study how these three operate to create national identity of India as it has a difficult and different past. The present paper examines how nationalism is developed in post-colonial India, a highly diverse nation. In a nation like India, national identity is continuously negotiated across various languages, regions, cultures, political ideologies, religious differences. Certain aspects of visual culture like physical sites of freedom struggle (Jallianwala bagh, Cellular Jail in Andaman), cinema, television shows, photographs etc. act as powerful conduits for transmitting the stories of freedom movement across generations. These narratives of the freedom struggle become transgenerational stories of trauma and resilience igniting nationalism among the audience/viewers. There are many films made with the backdrop of freedom struggle in almost all languages in India ever since the country got independence. Majority of the films exhibit cruelty of the British rule and the grit of the freedom fighters who not only sacrificed everything in very difficult times for the Indian independence. This paper examines the construction of national identity through this national memory in select Indian films (as discussing all the films is not possible) that deal with the freedom movement applying Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory,' Alison Landsberg's 'prosthetic memory,' and Olick's concept of "frameworks of memory." This study explains how collective memory regarding the freedom struggle revolves around trauma and resilience as represented through the visual cultural symbols

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ie. the selected films which demonstrate the nationalism of India. Apart from academic reasons, (which would be discussed later) selection of these films is based on their popularity in terms of box office collection, awards and recognitions they received, and their cult status in these prominent languages. (Though Hindi cinema is given a lot of importance and assumes the face of Indian cinema, Telugu and Tamil cinema are significant in terms of production, market value, and popularity across India.)

Defining Nation and Nationalism

A country is a geographical entity with its own governance and recognized sovereign system, while a nation is a population of ethnic unity inhabiting a territory of geographical unity. Scholars analyze the concept from various academic perspectives, including cultural, psychological, political, and ethnic. It is difficult to provide a scientific definition of a nation. Considering all these points, Benedict Anderson (6) proposes the definition of a nation as, "It is an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." Thus, Anderson's theorizing of a nation provides a more relevant explanation for its inherently ambivalent nature. The concept of "nation" is fluid, complex, and subject to interpretation, particularly when applied to a diverse country like India.

Defining nationalism, Gellner (168) opines that nationalism does not merely signify the emergence of nations into self-awareness; rather, it fabricates nations in contexts where they are absent. For a long time, nationalism was deeply connected with religion, and it changed during the eighteenth century in Western Europe. Anderson (15) writes that nationalism should be understood with the cultural systems which define it and Grosby (5) defines nationalism as, 'a set of beliefs about the nation'. Nationalism can be nurtured by a group on their free will, or the state officially takes charge of developing it among all those who are legally entitled to be its citizens, irrespective of their ethnic group, national identity, and culture. Therefore, we can conclude that nation and nationalism are shaped by the concepts related to political, religious, cultural etc. ideologies and have one or more of the following important components at their center—will (Renan), culture (Stalin), ideology (Gellner), imagination (Anderson), and ethnies (Smith).

Collective Memory and Nationalism

Grosby (16-17) argues that a nation's history is crucial for its identity and the formation of distinct territorial societies, built on unique cultural traditions emphasizing continuity with the past. Therefore, a nation is formed around shared traditions about a "spatially situated past" (10). It is Earnest Renan (277) in his speech 'What Is a Nation' coined a theory that nationalism is a spiritual principle guided by only two dimensions, past and present of a country. Renan suggests that shared memories and current consent among nationals can contribute to the development of a collective memory or national narrative.

Therefore, the study of nationalism considering its past has gained prominence in the academic world. Bernhard Giesen and Roland Barthes (79) argue that national identity is driven by "mythomoteurs" which are the traumas and triumphs of remembered histories. Giesen's argument is based on the idea that national identity is always oriented towards the past, whether it is traumatic or triumphant. Thus, collective memory, trauma, and nationalism of a nation are deeply interlinked, and it is essential to study how these three intersect with each other to create national identity. Jeffrey Alexander (21) highlights that cultural trauma, deeply ingrained in collective identity, often

signifies pivotal moments in national identity formation, transcending personal photographs, objects, events, or narratives. Traumatic experience acquires intergenerational status by being a fixed point of pain and assumes a timeless photographic memory. Though this image is stored in the memory of only the individual who directly experiences, this can be transferred to the next generation thus ascribing intergenerational status. Such traumatic experience is repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable, yet it is contagious and becomes a mummified event. Alison Landsberg (180) calls such mummified event as 'prosthetic memory', and Marianne Hirsch (170) calls it as 'postmemory'. This concept states that traumatic events belonging to older times are transmitted to the subsequent generations in a family or community through various cultural symbolic systems. Post-traumatic events indirectly generate memories along with their impact, which remain present and defy narrative reconstruction and comprehension. Thus, collective trauma becomes transgenerational trauma and can aid in developing nationalism among all those who are considered as a part of the nation. This is what Olick (156) calls 'frameworks of memory', which are long-term structures that shape the national identities. As reiterated by Seven Beukian (19), collective memory and trauma are closely connected and help in developing nationalism within a group.

Indian Cinema, National Memory and Nationalism: Focus on Trauma and Resilience

Considering the case study of India, nationalism in India was an idea given by the Europe and began its development in late 19th century based on an anti-colonial spiritual inner-sovereignty (Partha Chatterjee-5). In pre independence India, the national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Bankim Chandra, Rabindranath Tagore and others understood that seeking nationalism in India was very difficult owing to its diversity and their imperative fight against the colonial rule. They had to protect the national culture by promoting vernacular languages and showcasing dissent through art forms. During later times, developing nationalism in India assumed significance and the collective memories of trauma and resilience exhibited by Indian heroes during defining times of history like independence struggle, partition, 1971 India-Pakistan war, and Kargil war became "mythomoteurs". The stories of heroism and justice as well as trauma and resilience were the major means to reinforce nationalism among the youth of India.

While the concept of nation and nationalism has been theorized extensively by scholars, applying these frameworks to the Indian context presents peculiar challenges. Indian nationalism can be seen as a synthesis of Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities' and Partha Chatterjee's idea of the anticolonial 'spiritual' or 'inner' domain of sovereignty. This form of nationalism emerged within colonial society, even before India began the freedom movement. In the Indian context, nationalism manifests as a collective emotional attachment and a sense of belonging to a shared community, India which extends to all those who were born or will be born as Indian nationals. Despite the impossibility of any individual, even a Prime Minister or President, personally knowing every citizen, a strong sense of national unity persists. This unity is reinforced by anticolonial sentiments, anti-Pakistan rhetoric, and a belief in India as a sacred land. Together, these factors shape a distinct Indian nationalism rooted in both emotional and spiritual sovereignty. Furthermore, the protection and development of the nation's sovereignty across political, economic, and cultural domains remain central to the idea of nationalism for many Indians.

As Astrid Erll (02) points out, literature and film may clearly depict both individual and collective memory through encoding it into artistic forms like story structures, symbols, and metaphors along with its contents, its workings, its fragility, and its distortions. Thus, a film is given the status of a

leading medium of cultural memory. Role of cinema as a powerful medium and informative cultural tool shaping the Indian identity in terms of nationalism is noteworthy. Analyzing the place of cinema in Indian nation building, Karmakar and Catterall, (03) argue that feature films have shaped the national imaginary more effectively. Serving as a mainstream popular medium of entertainment, Hindi cinema has been influential 'by virtue of its pervasive mass appeal and its ability to deeply push itself into the popular psyche and create a penetrative impact upon people's thinking and imagination' (Kumar 458). Cinema initially in Hindi language and later in many prominent vernacular languages of India began focusing on the freedom movement to project the prosthetic memory of the agonizing oppression of the British rule and the resilience shown by the Indian heroes of freedom movement to imprint a sense of nationalism among its citizens. Since film is one of the most potent forms of communication, the story of the trauma experienced by the freedom fighters and their tenacity is preserved in Indians' collective memory fueling Indian nationalism. Hindi movies have been portrayed as representing nationalism by highlighting Indianness by incorporating different expressions of this into their plots and they have also offered alternate, more liberal, and inclusive ideas of national belonging. (Anjaria 142). The prosthetic memory or postmemory of the trauma and resilience of the real heroes like Bhagath Singh, Alluri Seetha Rama Raju, Veera Pandya Katta Bomman or the fictitious heroes in *RRR* on the screen could still be relevant in contemporary times as collective memory of the colonial rule continue to ignite nationalism among Indians.

The present paper considers select films from Hindi, Telugu and Tamil as these three are the major film industries in India and cater to majority of the population, and they are celebrated across the country. The depiction of the recurrent topic of suffering caused by the colonizers and the tenacity displayed by the protagonists from various stages of the freedom movement, serve as the fundamental uniting element that drives the selection of these films. The fact that these films come from diverse places of India and languages, demonstrates the common recurring theme and diversity of this vast country. Uniquely, all these films have a similar tone, when viewed in various times from the 1950s to the 2020s, they stoke nationalism in many generations. I have selected *Shaheed* (1965), a Hindi film directed by S. Rama Sarma, *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005) a Hindi film directed by Ketan Mehta, *Alluri Seetha Rama Raju* (1974) a Telugu film directed by V.Ramachandrarao, *RRR* (2022) a Telugu film directed by S.S. Rajamouli, *Veera Pandya Katta Bomman* (1959), a Tamil film directed by BR Panthulu.

Discussion

Shaheed (1965) is a Hindi film directed by S. Rama Sarma based on the life of Bhagat Singh, a freedom warrior. In addition to receiving high praise from critics and winning awards at the 13th National Film Awards, it became the eleventh highest-grossing film of the year. On August 15, 2016, it was shown retrospectively at the Independence Day Film Festival, which was organized by the Ministry of Defence and the Indian Directorate of Film Festivals in honor of the 69th Indian Independence Day. Life of Bhagat Singh inspired many movies in Hindi, some of them are: *Shaheed* (1948), *Shaheed-e-Azam Bhagat Singh* (1954), *Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (1963), *Shaheed* (1965), *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002), 23rd March 1931: *Shaheed* (2002) and *Shaheed-E-Azam* (2002). Such is the power of this freedom fighter that right from 1948, the narrative could hold the interest of film makers until the most recent times. In any case, his bravery, his perseverance, and his willingness to sacrifice his life for the nation were the highlights of every movie. Young Indians are strongly drawn to these films because of the valour exhibited by the protagonist and the trauma brought on by the British rule, developing a sense of anti-colonial

mindset coupled with nationalism. The film's visual aesthetic and narrative framework, strong emotional connect with the protagonist, support what Landsberg refers to as prosthetic memory, an affective connection formed by viewers who did not directly experience the historical events themselves, but the films can recreate postmemory. In one of the versions, the opening scene (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002)) shows Bhagat Singh observing the aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre to comprehend colonial cruelty, which is powerfully depicted by the camera's focus on the blood-stained soil and cutting-in with his astonished countenance. This traumatic imprint functions as a catalyst for his political awakening. An audience watching this scene would experience the same pain as experienced by the character because cinema is one medium which can induce emotions in the audience authentically. This is what Hirsch terms as postmemory, an intergenerational memory experienced not firsthand but passed down through stories, images, and cultural artifacts. The film emphasizes the moral complexity of the liberation fight by depicting Bhagat Singh's retribution against colonial atrocities as both tragic and vital. While images of torture and hunger strike transform the body into a location of nationalist struggle, muted hues and diegetic sound in prison scenes emphasize the loneliness and pain. The portrayal of Bhagat Singh's martyrdom in films transforms historical trauma into a source of hope and patriotic sentiment, symbolizing a resilient nationalism that operates as a prosthetic memory for audience in post-independence India.

Mangal Pandey: The Rising (2005), is a Hindi film directed by Ketan Mehta which depicts the atrocities of colonial rulers during 1850s and the first rebellion by Indians popularly known as Sepoy Mutiny. Each scene illustrates the pain inflicted by the British, encompassing both the physical abuse and the mental distress experienced by Indians in almost every frame. For example, an Indian woman servant compelled to breast feed the kid of a wealthy British woman, fails to feed her own child as she exhausts the milk and resorts to drug him to induce sleep. The film shows the brutality of the British in such a way that the actions of Mangal Pandey seem justified. The audience experience the trauma experienced by each character on the screen and begin to feel the national pride of having a hero like Mangal Pandey. Though the film received criticism for not being historically accurate, it received critical acclaim for one of those few films that showcased 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, the first major rebellion against the British rule. *Mangal Pandey: The Rising's* selection is supported not just by its historical and thematic relevance but also by its use of emotive narrative techniques, collective memory, and its place in the larger canon of Indian historical films. Because of these elements, it is an important case study for analysing the ways in which resistance and national pain are portrayed and viewed by subsequent generations as prosthetic collective memory. This film was premiered in the Marché du Film section of the 2005 Cannes Film Festival. It was the fourth highest-grossing film of 2005.

Alluri Seetha Rama Raju (1974) is one of the most significant Telugu cinemas for its impact, where it sustained in cinema halls for more than 200 days of continuous showcasing and earning a distributor share of ₹1 crore (equivalent to ₹30 crore or US\$3.5 million in 2023). Along with a national award for best lyrics, it won 11 Nandi (state level) awards and was screened at the Patriotic Film Festival held at Coimbatore in 2017, jointly presented by the Indian Directorate of Film Festivals and Ministry of Defence, commemorating the 70th Indian Independence Day. The portrayal of psychological and physical trauma inflicted by the colonial authorities, alongside the resilience exhibited by Seetha Rama Raju, a rebellion leader from South India and his followers, evokes profound emotions among all Indians. The patriotic display of the hero, who invites gunfire from a British officer, asserting that this is his utmost contribution to his country, coupled with his impactful dialogue and visible suffering, significantly create prosthetic memory among Indians,

even after four decades of its making. The protagonist Alluri is instilled with a sense of patriotic determination and sacrificial attitude, and this is aptly displayed by the tremendous rhetoric, fierce facial expressions and robust body language of the actor. Therefore, along with the visual display of the cruelty inflicted by the British, strong rhetoric assumes emotional register.

Veera Pandya Katta Bomman (1959) is a Tamil film directed by B.R.Panthulu. is based on the story of an 18th century South Indian king who rebelled against the East India Company. This film was premiered in London on 10 May 1959, and released in Tamil Nadu six days later. It was a commercial success, running for over 25 weeks in theatres and becoming a silver jubilee film, receiving international awards (first Tamil film) at the 1960 Afro-Asian Film Festival in Cairo, and received a Certificate of Merit as part of the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Tamil. *Veera Pandya Katta Bomman* was re-released in 1984, and a digitally restored version was released on 21 August 2015; both were commercially successful. Again, historical accuracy was not given compliments, but its ability to stir nationalism and patriotism among the countrymen was always appreciated. Particularly, the scene where the protagonist is chained and beaten physically and the resilience shown by him declaring his motherland is more important for which he can tolerate any amount of physical pain, impacts the audience emotionally. Both *Alluri Seetha Rama Raju* and *Veera Pandya Katta Bomman* use recurring visual metaphor of gun fires, chains, pool of blood depicting the colonial oppression and the rhetoric of the protagonist assuming the emotional register and cultural symbol of resilience. Film making is the most authentic make-believe art with an immediate impact that is cathartic. All these period movies recreate the pre-independence times in terms of costumes, social aesthetics, vehicles like steam engine trains, presence of the British actors, etc to make the audience immerse in those times ensuring immediate, powerful, and anticolonial nationalistic fervour.

RRR (Roudram -Anger, Ranam -War, Rudhiram -Blood-2022) is a Telugu film directed by SS.Rajamouli. This is selected as one of the ten best films of the year by the National Board of Review. The song 'Naatu Naatu' won the Oscar for Best Original Song at the 95th Academy Awards, making it the first song from an Indian film, as well as the first from an Asian film, to win in this category. The film became the third Indian film and first Telugu film to receive nominations at the Golden Globe Awards, including Best Foreign Language Film, won Best Original Song for 'Naatu Naatu', making it the first Indian (as well as the first Asian) nominee to win the award. *RRR* also won the awards for Best Foreign Language Film and Best Song at the 28th Critics' Choice Awards. At the 69th National Film Awards, the film won six awards.

As the subtitles indicate, the film deals with trauma inflicted by the colonial rule and the patriotic exhibition of the freedom fighters Ram and Bheem (fictional) along with all their supporters who are striving for freedom of the nation. The context, the characters and the story are fictional and do not claim any reality unlike the films we discussed above. The narrative moves back and forth allowing the audience to connect how the two (fictional) heroes unite for a common goal of achieving the freedom of India. The audience would be affected by the narrative, visuals, songs and the overall experience of the cinema. For example, the scene where Bheem (one of the protagonists) is being physically tortured and his blood flows like a river while he sings the song 'Komuram bheemudo' becomes a powerful emotional memory site. As Indian films are known to enhance the emotion through the songs, this song and the visual representation of the physical trauma and the resilience shown by Bheem fill the audience with a strong anticolonial sentiment along with nationalistic spirit. This film attempts to instill emotional nationalism in the audience across India (as it is dubbed in all major languages of India) through spectacle, embodiment, and heroism, creating a contemporary nationalist myth that may obscure the complex realities of India's

colonial history. Therefore, the movie aims to foster pride and an emotional connection to India's anti-colonial past, but it does so by elevating militant nationalism, homogenizing identities, and mythologizing history. In all these films, *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, *Shaheed*, *Alluri Seetha Rama Raju*, *Veera Pandya Katta Bomman*, and *RRR*, the collective trauma of colonial oppression becomes transgenerational trauma, contributing to the prosthetic memory or postmemory for subsequent generations as traumatic collective memory of a nation ignites the construction of a resilient national identity. This reflects Olick's (156) concept of "frameworks of memory," wherein long-term narrative structures, such as historical films help shape and sustain nationalist consciousness across generations.

Conclusion

Defining a national identity takes center stage while attempting to analyze the nationalism of a nation. Though defining a nation is a complex idea as it is both fluid and complex, Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as an imagined community and Ernest Renan's insistence upon a nation's past to define its present, make it relevant. Grassby's idea of nationalism as a set of beliefs developed among its people and based on the collective memory of a nation stand out as a significant concept. While India struggled longtime searching for a unifying factor that can serve as a strong narrative to hold nationalism, Gieson's idea of traumatic past as unifying factor is an appropriate concept. Considering these concepts and comprehending the traumatic past of a nation through memory studies perspective is the theoretical framework used in this paper. While the trauma and resilience of the past assume fundamental stature, their presence in the collective memory of a nation gain implications for subsequent generations.

Appropriately identified by the national leaders of India, anti-colonial sentiment (among some more strategies) holds prominence even after the independence of this country. This strategy would continue to sustain the nationalistic fervour owing to the contested histories, and identity politics of India. The narrative of freedom struggle continues to inspire unity, question injustice, or bolster ideological agendas, compelling the social and political relevance till date. As an extension to this ideology, presenting the trauma inflicted by the colonial rule and resilience exhibited by the freedom fighters reaffirms the ideals of sacrifice, courage and unity which are fundamental factors that unite Indians. This prosthetic memory not only ignites nationalism among the newer generations but also asserts national pride and cohesion. As Marianne Hirsch articulates, postmemory denotes the intergenerational transmission of trauma, wherein the subsequent generation forms a deep affective connection to the personal, collective, and cultural experiences of their predecessors. This need not happen through direct experience but can happen through mediated forms of cultural symbols like narratives, visual representations, and embodied cultural practices encountered during their formative years.

Among all communicative media, cinema is one of the most impactful owing to multiple reasons like its visual impact, immersive ability, and its ability to arouse emotions instantaneously. India is a global hub of film production, producing the highest number of films annually and it enjoys the status of a cultural event with massive social reach, cutting across literacy, region, and class. Owing to these reasons, this research paper considers a sample of films from three significant languages of India for studying how these films act as prosthetic memory to depict the cruel colonial rule and the valour of the nation to transmit the nationalistic fervour among subsequent generation Indians. The audience who was not present during the freedom struggle will witness a strong emotion which is transmitted through the images on the screen, the resilience expressed through verbal dialogues of the protagonists to understand and empathize with the freedom

fighters. The unifying aspect presented in these films is the collective trauma and resilience to survive and reject the colonial rule, which shapes the nationalism of the generations which are far away from the freedom fight. Therefore, the national memory of the colonial rule in India becomes transgenerational and prosthetic in these films. This collective memory is transmitted by cinema which can use the power of senses to evoke the targeted emotion among the audience. It uses the actors' bodies, the camera work, the set, the language, the lighting, the music, the colour palette, the rhetoric, the songs, along with other technological nuances to ignite the targeted anticolonial and national spirit among the audience as films are living texts that mediate memory, forge national identity, and influence collective consciousness. In spite of being beyond historical, (*RRR*), often dramatizing the events (*Alluri Seetha Rama Raju*, *Veera Pandya Katta Bomman*), reducing the complexity into simplified binary narratives (*Mangal Panday: The Rising*), valorizing militarized nationalism (*Shaheed*, *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*), and sometimes emotional manipulation, films still occupy a more critical position as cultural events and continue to occupy significant place in analysing nationalism, collective memory and trauma against the backdrop of Indian independence movement.

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