

# Grieving through popular culture

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More than six million Jews died in the genocide unleashed by the far-right German rule of Adolf Hitler. When World War II (1939-1945) ended, Europe mourned those dark years for decades through books, cinema and popular culture. It still does. This grieving through popular culture is society's way of talking to itself. It acknowledges the pain of what happened and helps deal with cataclysmic events like the Holocaust.

Compare that to the partition of India into two nations in 1947. This last act of malice by British colonial rulers had a devastating impact that is felt to this day in the two and then three countries — India, Pakistan and Bangladesh — that the event created. Over two million Indians were butchered in the displacement and riots that followed. Yet we never had cultural chest beating — through books, cinema, plays, music or other art forms — at the same level as the Holocaust. There were films such as MS Sathyu's outstanding *Garm Hawa* (1974), Saadat Hasan Manto's searing short stories or plays such as Asghar Wajahat's *Jis Lahore ni Vekhya O Jamtya ee Nahin*. But it did not seem enough. My parents were Partition children. Growing up in a house with stories of homes, properties and villages in far-off places like Abbottabad (now in Pakistan), we were very aware of what we had lost. But it is not clear how much has been understood about Partition and what it has meant to almost two generations of Indians, especially from the north and the east.

That is why I dived into John W Hood's *Tear-Drenched Earth: Cinema and the Partition of India* with enthusiasm. In this delightful book, Hood analyses the impact of Partition through almost 40 films from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. There are many gems such as Pakistani director Sabiha Sumar's *Khamosh Pani* and Chandraprakash Dwivedi's *Ptnjar* (both 2003), Richard Attenborough's

*Gandhi* (1982), Yash Chopra's *Dharmputra* (1961) among other equally outstanding movies. Every film is analysed with an empathy and sensitivity that seems rare these days. Hood doesn't mince his words on the

chicanery of the British and on the hows and whys of Partition. And like him, you are appalled at how badly the whole thing was thought through.

Cyril Radcliffe, the man who physically

drew the line separating Hindu-dominated India from the Muslim one in the west and the east, had the worst job possible. In seven weeks, he had to draw lines that had some ridiculous effects — such as a brothel that was half in India and half in West Pakistan. He was asked to do this without knowing the land, its culture and conflicts. And when he wanted to understand things better, he was ordered to heed the instructions given by the office of the last Viceroy (Lord Mountbatten).

There is a W H Auden poem that Hood reproduces in this book. It captures Radcliffe's dilemma, his moral qualms and physical worries as he worked with out-of-date maps and old census data. Every Indian kid should read that poem just to understand the British government's utter disregard for the people that it had ruled for over 200 years. You marvel at the ridiculousness of having a man with no idea of what India is, drawing an imaginary line that would cut through homes, fields and hearts.

Hood, an Australian, is a film writer and scholar who has written

extensively on Indian cinema. He is also a well-known translator of Bengali literature including *Hstory of the Bengali People* by Niharranjan Ray. His pedigree, then, is faultless. That is evident from the perspective he offers, the detailed background, the deep dive into the emotional state of the characters. As an Indian, you totally get him.

The one thing that stood out for me is his choice of films. Largely, it is very good. For instance, Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House* (2017) or Govind Nihalani's *Tamas* (1988) are straightforward events set during Partition. And they illuminate aspects that you would have never have thought of — such as the division of the cutlery between India and Pakistan in *Viceroy's House*. Or things that you

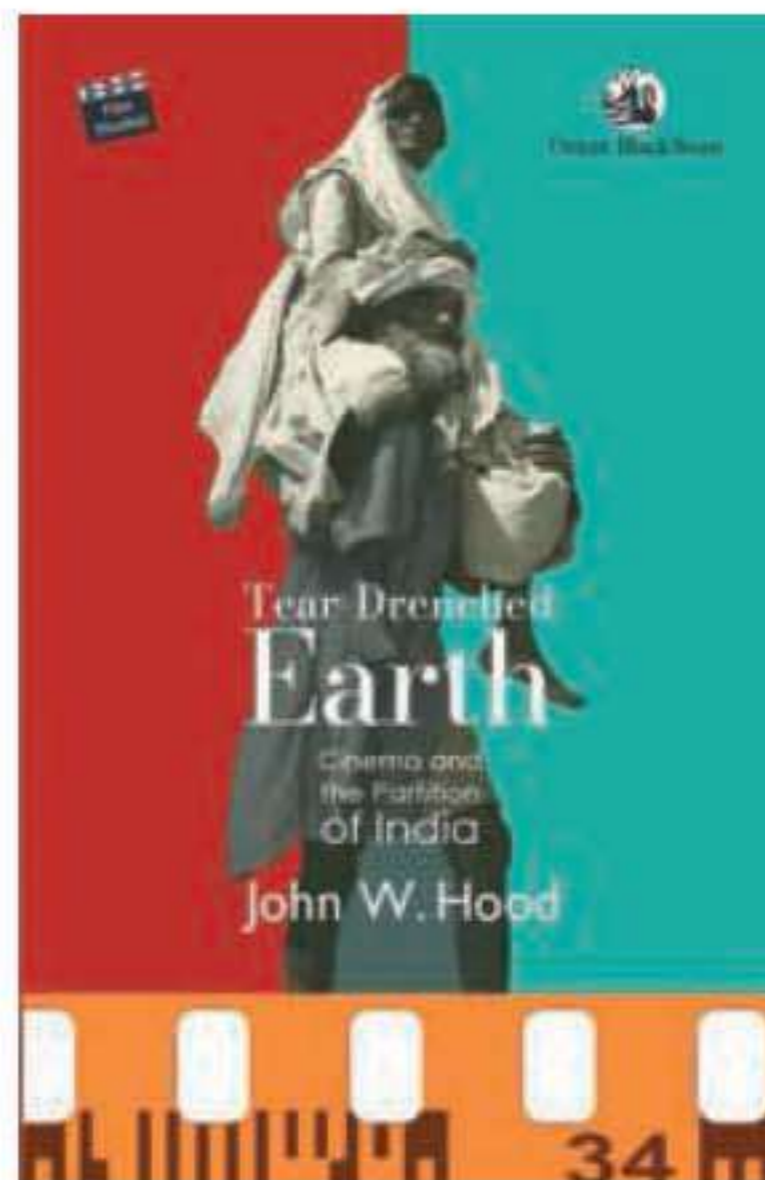
know, such as how perfectly reasonable humans became bestial creatures during the free-for-all in the runup to Partition, in *Tamas*.

However, I had trouble getting my head around why films such as Goutam Ghose's *Shankhachil* (2016) or Kabir Khan's *Bajrangl Bhaljaan* (2015), about an event or a story set long after Partition, have been chosen. But Hood emphasises throughout that he is examining not just Partition but its impact on people, culture, geography, attitudes even after decades. It is fascinating to read the analysis of each of these films. What

holds you is Hood's writing and his empathy for the events, even in some of the over-the-top films such as *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2000).

He keeps offering an overarching perspective once in a while and even revisits some films at different points in the book. There is, however, no final word on what it is that he learnt or what stands out from his exploration of the cinema of Partition. That is my good-natured quibble with an otherwise eminently readable book.

If cinema as an extension of popular culture interests you and if you are curious about a relatively less explored chapter of India's history, this book is worth picking up.



**TEAR-DRENCHED EARTH:  
CINEMA AND THE PARTITION OF  
INDIA**

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**Publisher:** Orient BlackSwan

**Price:** ₹910 **Pages:** 207