

Haunted Geographies and Partitioned Selves : Memory, Nostalgia, and Decolonial Desire in Bengali Films *Bishorjon* and *Mati*

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Abstract

*This article examines how the Partition of Bengal is depicted in the films Kaushik Ganguly's *Bishorjon* (2017) and Leena Gangopadhyay's *Mati* (2018) as a real and ongoing trauma that continues to influence memory, emotions, and locations, rather than merely as a historic break. The films' emphasis on female lead characters positions them as significant cultural memory bearers, whose emotional experiences stand in for ongoing trauma and intergenerational healing. The study also looks at homes, borders, and rivers as problematic places, landscapes that bear the scars of colonialism and concerns from the postcolonial era. These locations are ephemeral, replete with nostalgia, displacement, and spectral recollections of a Bengal that was once united. The study makes the case that both movies convey emotional maps of loss, nostalgia, and a desire for decolonization. They question strict nationalist histories and highlight a shared, changing cultural identity that goes beyond political divisions and time limits.*

Keywords : Partition, Memory, Gender, Postcolonial movies, Spatial Trauma

Introduction

The 1947 Partition of Bengal, besides being a political split, was a terrible human tragedy that tore communities distant, propelled millions of people to leave their homes, and left the local culture with deep emotional scars and distress. Movies

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were the powerful way to bring back lost voices, feelings, and broken memories, even though historical stories often focus on male, nationalist views of the partition. Bengali cinema, in particular, has offered a deeply emotional and nuanced perspective on the Partition, focusing not on grand political messages but rather on intimate portrayals of love, desire, and grief. This study portrays how two contemporary Bengali films, *Bishorjon* (2017) and *Mati* (2018), reinterpret Partition as an unresolved and eerie experience. These movies, situated in the unstable and shifting regions of the India-Bangladesh border, create poignant scenes where personal melancholy intersects with historical suffering. They bring up not just feelings of longing for a lost homeland but also a wish to move past the effects of colonial borders and recover the emotional and cultural connections broken by Partition. Using the theoretical studies- Memory Studies, Postcolonial Theory, and Trauma Studies, this research looks at three connected areas:

1. The importance of gender and feelings in passing down cultural memories through generations.
2. The portrayal of Partition trauma as a factor that influences both personal and shared identity.
3. The symbolic role of physical places like rivers, ruins, borders, and homes as layers that show the impact of colonial harm and postcolonial division.

By viewing *Bishorjon* and *Mati* not just as stories but as films that remember, the study suggests that these movies present different histories that challenge main nationalist views, reclaim marginalized identities, and hint at emotional, cross-border connections. In this way, they turn the Bengali film industry into a place of grief, memory, and resistance. These haunted places are filled with colonial violence and the breakage after colonial times, becoming symbols for a broken identity. As characters move through these in-between spaces, the films highlight a desire for decolonization to take back histories that have been erased, to fight against the splits of nation and identity, and to rebuild human connections that have been cut off by political borders. Using film studies, memory theory, and postcolonial geography, this study explores how *Bishorjon* and *Mati* show the unresolved sadness from Partition in a cinematic way. These films do not just remember history; they change how we see it, showing that the Bengali screen still carries the heavy feelings of a divided land and its fragmented identities.

Gendered Memory and Emotional Inheritance

Partition causes significant gendered harm in addition to political disruption. Two important Bengali films that look at this trauma from a gender-focused view of sharing memories are *Bishorjon* (2017) and *Mati* (2018), which explores how women's memories, experienced, passed down, and often overlooked, affect both personal and group identity and the cultural impact of partition.

Meghla shares the tale of a family that has been moved from their home by tracing her roots back to her family's original home in East Bengal from India. Since she holds the deep feelings of her grandmother's quietness, yearning, and

displacement, her journey is both a physical trip and an emotional one. The main idea of the film and a symbol for sharing memories across generations is Meghla's journey back to the home her grandmother had to leave. This return is depressing rather than nostalgic in the usual sense because of the lack of closure and the gendered task of remembering. Meghla's inherited memory is shaped not by archival records but rather by familial anecdotes, repressed grief, and feminine silences. Likewise, *Bishorjon* uses the idea of love between countries to show how women's bodies and feelings become places of mixed national identity. Padma, the main character of *Bishorjon*, is a Bangladeshi woman who falls for Nasir, an Indian Muslim man who finds himself on her side of the river. The issues from the partition come back through Padma's wishes, worries, and sacrifices. Her choices are impacted by a past she didn't choose but must contend with. The river, which runs between Bangladesh and India, represents both division and change, mirroring the unequal distribution of memories among genders and generations. Like Meghla, Padma has a past full of suffering, longing, and the challenges of reuniting people, which makes her a container of shared memories and trauma.

In both movies, women's acts of remembering are shown as alternative histories, kind but strong ways of keeping cultural memories that go against the male leads and nationalist stories. Meghla's determination to visit her grandmother's former home in Mati and Padma's choice to hold on to love in *Bishorjon* stand out as acts of feminist resistance. These actions aren't clearly political, but they are very much about decolonization, rooted in the emotional effort of bringing back lost or denied connections. Crucially, these actions are not passive. Meghla's journey is intentional; she actively tries to remember what was lost and face the removal hidden in Partition discussions. Similarly, Padma's emotional choices question boundaries established without the consent or consideration of the women who would experience their impact most profoundly. These female main characters refuse to be passive victims of passed-down trauma; rather, they explore, rethink, and impart new meaning to their inherited memories, changing them into ways of survival and strength. Another important theme in both films is the sharing of memories from mothers. In *Mati*, the grandmother's absence is obvious, not because she is present, but because of her quietness and her decision not to discuss the homeland she abandoned. Meghla's inheritance, then, is one of silence, a silence that needs to be interpreted and communicates more than spoken words. This shows how trauma, especially among women, is often shared through actions, feelings, and things left unsaid instead of through spoken stories. In *Bishorjon*, Padma takes on a motherly role, caring for Nasir and keeping him safe, yet her emotional efforts are never fully acknowledged. Her memories of living together in a community and mixed culture suggested by her Hindu-Muslim unity exist in home life, in lullabies and food, and in healing herbs and temple bells. These are not big actions but simple, daily expressions of memory that fight against forgetting the political division.

Through the view of gendered memory inheritance, *Mati* and *Bishorjon* show how women are both observers and bearers of historical pain. However, they are not just victims; their wishes, whether to go back, to love, to remember, or to resist, provide a different viewpoint against nationalist stories that often overlook the feminine and emotional aspects of Partition. By highlighting women's memory and feelings, these films do more than show loss; they restore broken identities and challenge the main male-centered stories of Partition. The troubled places in *Mati* and *Bishorjon* are not just physical areas affected by displacement but also mental spaces filled with gendered memories and emotional inheritance where the self, damaged by history, seeks completeness through memory and love.

Fragmented Selves and Post Memory

Bengali movies show up characters with emotional trauma whose identities are shaped by both memories and nostalgia, as well as by being there and not being there. *Bishorjon* (2017) and *Mati* (2018) offer touching comprehension on the plots of postmemory and fragmented identities in Bengal after Partition. Both films illustrate the emotional effects of being displaced, feeling loss, and experiencing longing in the minds of characters who hold memories they did not directly live through but still feel inside them.

Marianne Hirsch's idea of post memory talks about how the 'next generation' relates to the cultural pain of their ancestors. Unlike direct memory, postmemory is influenced by stories, pictures, silence, and feelings. In the story of *Mati*, Meghla, the main character, finds herself troubled not by her own memories but by the lessons she never learned. Her grandmother, who survived Partition, kept quiet about her roots in East Bengal. However, it is this silence that deeply influences Meghla's identity. When Meghla goes to Bangladesh to search for her grandmother's lost house, she is not just crossing a border; she is taking an emotional trip back to a shared sadness. Her motivations stem not from typical nostalgia, but from a lasting post-memory that compels her to reach out. Her divided self, a woman living in West Bengal but pulled towards the ancestral land of East Bengal, shows the identity struggle passed down to those born after Partition. In this way, *Mati* illustrates post memory as an emotional legacy that challenges and changes identity, even when there is no direct experience.

In *Bishorjon*, the idea of post memory takes a more emotional and romantic direction. Padma, though not a post-Partition child in the strictest sense, still feels the influence of shared cultural memories of a united, mixed Bengal. Her love for Nasir, a Muslim man from India, represents a symbolic reclaiming of that lost togetherness. Her divided identity, trapped between societal demands and her true emotions, reflects the divided land she lives in. Through Padma, the film shows that post memory is not always passed down through genes; it can also be shared through community, culture, and emotional history. The emotional landscape of *Mati* is defined by missing things—land, stories, and closure. Meghla's identity is based not on what she knows, but on what she feels. This feeling of being a split self, stuck

between the past and the present and between two homelands, represents a post-memorial state. Her sense of self is built on emptiness - emptiness in family history, in feeling like she belongs, and in national identity. Her wish to go back to a place she has never visited is not unreasonable; it comes from a troubled landscape, where memories are shared through desire, not facts.

In the same way, Padma in *Bishorjon* lives with a broken sense of identity. Her love for Nasir is socially not allowed, yet strongly pulls at her feelings. She finds it challenging for her to balance her duties to her community and even her loyalty to her emotions. The river that separates India and Bangladesh represents her divided self, changing yet split, unbroken yet defined. Padma's broken identity is not just the result of love across borders; it is influenced by a deeper, inherited memory of a time when there were no lines and no barriers between people. Both characters experience a passed-down confusion, a type of historical dizziness that keeps them caught between competing ideas of past and present, home and exile, and self and others.

One of the most noticeable features of both films is their focus on silences - what is not spoken, what is forgotten, or what is intentionally pushed aside. In *Mati*, the grandmother's silence becomes a place of post-memory. Meghla's broken self is not just the result of historical loss but also of a family's unwillingness to grieve openly. This silence acts as both a political and a mental act, showing how personal stories are often influenced by a wider collective silence in post-Partition South Asia. On the other hand, Padma resists silence. Her love, her sadness, and her eventual sacrifice are all expressed, acted out, and remembered. Yet by the end, she is also silenced, her voice quieted by social rules. This difference shows the gendered nature of post-memory; women inherit trauma not as stories but as expectations, not as history but as emotional weight. Their identities break apart under the strain of what they must bear but cannot express.

The postmemorial situation in these movies is also naturally about decolonization. By reflecting on Partition through their personal memories and feelings, both *Mati* and *Bishorjon* challenge the official narratives of countries that depict Partition as a necessary decision or an unavoidable political situation. Instead, they highlight emotional truth, personal memories, and deep longing. Meghla's wish to claim land that the Indian government does not see as hers is a form of quiet rebellion. It challenges the authority of borders created by colonial leaders. Padma's love for a man across the border shows that belonging cannot be determined by national identities. Their broken identities do not aim to be 'fixed' into a complete state by returning to nationalism. Instead, they accept complexity, loss, and variety. In doing this, they represent a decolonial wish not for one homeland, but for connection, memory, and emotional fairness. *Mati* and *Bishorjon* are not stories that end neatly. They are tales of people haunted by the traces of a past that will not stay hidden. Meghla and Padma's broken parts reveal a generation that continues to feel the psychological effects of Partition. Through the viewpoint of postmemory, we observe that memory is not just individual; it is often social,

cultural, and strongly tied to gender. Their emotional moments portray how trauma has been handed down throughout the generations and still impacts identity today. Both films encourage us to reconsider what it means to belong, remember, and heal. By exploring locations that are haunted and identities formed by memory, they provide a new view on Partition not only as a historical event but also as a present experience shown in bodies, feelings, and passed-down silence.

Spatial Hauntings and Postcolonial Landscapes

In movies after the Partition, locations are not just simple backgrounds; they are layered with memories, pain, and desire. The films *Bishorjon* (2017) and *Mati* (2018) show how the places in postcolonial Bengal become emotionally intense areas filled with the history of breaks and losses. These haunting spaces where hidden past traumas resurface through physical places and the creation of postcolonial landscapes come together in these films to show Partition not as something that is finished, but as a continuing and raw hurt. Through rivers, borders, ruins, and family homes, the films place memories and grief back onto the land, making the location itself an active part in telling the story of decolonial wishes and broken identities.

In *Mati*, Meghla's trip to East Bengal represents more than a physical return; it symbolizes an exploration of space as memory. The house she goes to, her grandmother's family home, is not only a building; it is a haunting place filled with what is missing and strong emotions. The creaky floorboards, the kept courtyard, and the doorway where she pictures her grandmother once stood are not just building details but channels for ghostly memories. They represent what Avery Gordon calls 'haunting,' a social occurrence where forgotten histories come back through emotional disturbances. The haunted house in *Mati* acts as a counter-archive: it remembers what official history ignores. While countries have often hidden the emotional aspects of Partition under a message of progress and patriotism, this run-down house remembers sadness, exile, and desire. It does not stand as a sign of nostalgia but of deep loss, highlighting the gap between homeland and identity in postcolonial Bengal. In *Bishorjon*, the Ichamati river has two roles: it divides India and Bangladesh, yet it also connects Padma and Nasir. It is a transitional area, a living reminder of colonial maps that not only split land but also separated lives. Rivers usually represent flow and continuity, but in *Bishorjon*, the Ichamati turns into a political wound, signifying both the pain of separation and the chance for forbidden love. The river is filled with stories of refugees crossing, of lost families, and of hopes that sank. It acts as a symbol for changing identities, indicating that the postcolonial identity in Bengal is not set but constantly changing, always navigating between borders. The river's ongoing presence in the story shows the unfinished aspect of Partition, highlighting how its emotional effects continue to impact future generations.

Postcolonial landscapes in these movies are not only physical; they are also ideas and feelings. They show the brokenness and violence of decolonization. In *Mati*, the land of East Bengal is remembered through passed-down feelings- hunger,

fear, and silence. It becomes a place that tells the story of what was lost: not just land but a way of living. The journey to this land is filled with confusion, cultural separation, and strong emotions. This experience shakes Meghla's identity, transforming the landscape into a place of disconnection and redefinition. In *Bishorjon*, the village on the Bangladesh side becomes a mixed space, both hopeful and troubling. Padma's home holds love and desire, but also fear and watchfulness. It exists in a space that balances memory with military presence, as well as tradition with the act of breaking rules. The landscape here is filled with worries about belonging: who is part of this place? Who can love someone across the river? Who can remember freely?

The spatial politics in both films reflect the residues of colonial mapping. Partition did not just redraw borders; it restructured emotional geographies. In postcolonial films, especially these two, feelings are tied to specific places: sadness clings to broken homes, love is linked to rivers at borders, and quietness is found in family kitchens. These areas not only inhabit the characters, but they also shape them. Memory lives in the soil (*Mati*), flows in the river, and haunts the buildings. This affective cartography challenges the colonial and postcolonial state's logic of space as merely administrative or strategic. The films suggest that the land does not forget. It takes in the steps of those who were forced to leave, the quiet voices of those who are separated, and the stillness of the dead. Haunted places are strong spaces; they do not allow being forgotten and seek recognition. The lasting memory in these areas is a way of resisting colonialism, taking back land not as ownership but as a legacy.

Mati and *Bishorjon* create a strong visual language of haunting spaces, where places are filled with memory, loss, and desire. These films do not see space as just empty land but as a lively record of displacement, sadness, and a broken sense of belonging marked by the divides of Partition and the quiet that came after. The river in *Bishorjon*, the family home in *Mati*, and the changing borders in both films act as emotional landscapes where postcolonial trauma is constantly felt and explored. Colonial history not only impacts the postcolonial places, but also imbues them with significance through emotional marks such as love, mourning, and return. These areas become stores of decolonial wishes, where the characters are not looking to go back to a lost homeland but to make peace with a past that still affects today. In the end, the haunting spaces in these films show that Partition is still ongoing, woven into rivers, homes, and people. By focusing on women's experiences and feelings, *Mati* and *Bishorjon* redirect the deliberation from government-centered ideas of land to the personal, complicated, and emotional maps of memory. These film locations, scenes, settings, and sceneries encourage or prompt us not only to recognize or understand trauma but also to make us feel it in a physical way and to contemplate how the memories of Partition still affect our ideas of home, belonging, and identity in postcolonial South Asia.

Conclusion

Mati and *Bishorjon* explore the aftereffects of Partition by transforming landscapes into records of emotional and historical pain. These films address haunted places, where rivers, ruins, and family homes become locations of unhealed sorrow, broken memories, and hidden wishes. The characters in both stories, especially Meghla and Padma, represent divided identities, shaped by inherited silence, shared feelings, and the ongoing struggles of divided borders. By viewing the past not as a faraway event but as something that is still felt today, the films challenge the usual male-centered and government-focused stories of Partition. Instead, they highlight memories tied to gender, passing on emotions, and a desire for freedom, wanting connection and completeness beyond national boundaries. These wishes are not unrealistic; they are based on emotional truth, shaped by silence, sacrifice, and forbidden love. By showing broken identities moving through places filled with loss and significance, *Mati* and *Bishorjon* provide a strong criticism of the lasting colonial maps that still influence the emotional and political life of the region. They do not attempt to repair the hurt caused by Partition but seek to recognize its lasting impact, showing how it is felt over generations, within connections, and through people and locations. Ultimately, these films create a space for emotional understanding, urging viewers to face the suffering of Partition not through a final historical answer but through compassionate remembrance, awareness of spaces, and feminist pushback. By doing this, they offer not just a way to grieve what was lost but also a perspective on how memory and love can question boundaries and rethink belonging in postcolonial South Asia.

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