

## **Adaptation or Historical Anomaly?: Partition Narratives and Their Visual Counterparts**

**Ayesha Akram**

PhD Scholar

Department of English and Literary Studies  
University of Management & Technology, Lahore

### **Abstract**

This research accentuates the presence of multi-layered histories within partition literature and its adaptations as a historiographic *mise en abyme*— an interpretive multiplicity of historical narratives. The aim is to highlight, probe and eventually determine the significance of addressing multivocality within sensitive historical accounts when told through the aesthetic mediums of fiction and film. In the context of this research, the traditional narrative of the partition of the Subcontinent includes political and nationalistic attitudes on both sides of the divide. The research sets out to explore the extent to which these overreaching accounts and wide-ranging versions of the partition empower the concerned entities to give subjective meanings to their partition experiences. Gurinder Chadha's film *Viceroy's House* (2017), which is partly based on the memoirs of Louis Mountbatten, documented in *Freedom at Midnight* by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre (1976) is taken as the case study, with reference to its source text. The primary trigger of this research is the debate between the Traditionalist and Revisionist school of Historiography, as it seeks to examine the inherent problematic nature of revisionist partition history on text and on screen. This research presents the textual and film narratives of partition as *alternative archives*, whose authenticity and validity is yet to be established, in comparison with the historical documents/texts. It advocates the necessity to constantly re-evaluate and reinterpret history in the light of new facts; however, all attempts to revise history in the name of aesthetics, without merit and evidence, should be recognized as subjective versions.

**Keywords:** *Adaptation; mise en abyme; multivocality; partition; historiography, revisionism.*

### **Introduction and Rationale of the Study**

Film and cinema target a far larger number of viewership as compared to historical documents, and they subsequently become major mediums through which the masses acquire their understanding of critical historical events. The popularity of these visual narratives leads to an important question of how these two mediums of film and fiction influence and affect the original historical episodes, if mishandled. This could lead to another argument on the authenticity of history itself and the authority determining

its accuracy. Clearly, this is a complicated endeavor that cannot simply be answered in one manner, without looking at every possible explanation available. The attempt to embrace and employ Historical Revisionism in partition texts and adaptations, presents the partition narratives with two opposite extremes. On the one hand, these narratives strive to re-evaluate and reimagine historical facts, on the other hand, they suffer the possibility of historical inauthenticity, inaccuracy and biasness while trying to fuse historical facts and literary aesthetics. The literary and aesthetic confusion arises with the need to re-evaluate a historical event in fiction or in film while simultaneously making the adaptation vulnerable as historical inaccuracy. This research aims to highlight, probe and eventually determine the importance of validity and authenticity of sensitive historical accounts when told through the mediums of fiction and film.

The current research also argues that the postcolonial partition narratives and their subsequent adaptations suffer the tilt of political, religious or nationalistic influence that consequently affect the neutrality of historical accounts and indoctrinate the readers towards a particular narrative depending on which side of the divide one falls. The research also formulates an important argument aiming at the necessity of recognizing the right divide between fact and fiction and enquires about the extent to which one of these can overshadow the other when dealing with facts through the medium of fiction and film. The research argues that the absence of precise history covering the period of partition has helped the development of narratives which at times are a world apart from each other, and the adaptations of these partition novels on screen have further reinforced these narratives and presented them as facts to the potential viewers. The sole focus of this research is to investigate the inherent multiplicity of meaning and interpretation arising from within an historical event and highlighting the effects it leaves on the larger frame of things promoted through textual and visual narratives.

Anne-Marie Scholz, in her book *From Fidelity to History, Film Adaptations as Cultural Events in the Twentieth Century* (2013), discusses the traditional concerns of fidelity within adaptation studies and shifts the focus on the issues arising from intertextuality of historical narratives. In this connection, she cites Hayden White who states, “it is absurd to suppose that because a historical discourse is cast in the mode of a narrative, it must be mythical, fictional, substantially imaginary, or otherwise “unrealistic” in what it tells us about the world” (p.12). White’s statement falls in line with the ongoing argument of the research that in order to be imaginative and creative, historical narratives do not necessarily have to undergo the stigma of inauthenticity or subjectivity. Scholz emphasizes the lack of theoretical attention on historical fiction and adaptation studies. Another critic and journalist, Maria Margaronis, writes an interesting comparative article “The Anxiety of Authenticity: Writing Historical Fiction at the End of the Twentieth Century” (2015) centered on Ian McEwan and Toni Morrison’s novels with respect to their treatment of historical accounts in their respective fictions. Margaronis (2015) addresses the key question of how important it is for a literary writer to stay true to the factual information while dealing with

historical accounts. She poses some critical questions in the opening arguments: “What responsibility does a novelist have to the historical record? How much – and what kinds of things – is it permissible to invent?” (p.138). She further reflects: “What are the moral implications of taking someone else’s experience, especially the experience of suffering and pain, and giving it the gloss of form?” (p.138).

The questions raised by Margaronis are substantial and closer to this study, since she also approaches the issue of re-evaluation and retelling of an important historical record in the backdrop of different wartime narratives. Reinhard Isensee, in an article “Fiction as Reconstruction of History: Narratives of the Civil War in American Literature” (2009), discusses how the medium of fictional representation in literature and film influences public opinion in favor or disagreement of an historical event. Isensee (2009) explains how the Civil War is a war that never goes away, which is due to ongoing adaptations and cultural texts that revolve around this historical event. He contends that although there is a whole extensive body of scholarship available on the Civil War itself, almost every American has been exposed to this event through one medium of aesthetic representation or another. Isensee (2009) elaborates how the new historical approach can prove to be productive in investigating and exploring the re-imagination and reconstruction of history since it also acknowledges literature as a medium that is historically situated.

Dr. Pippa Virdee, in her work on British colonial history, talks both about the silenced voices and narratives within the postcolonial fiction and the confused history we are left with post-partition. One of her chapters, “‘No-man’s Land’ and the Creation of Partitioned Histories in India/Pakistan” (2014), examines the violent nature of the event of Partition and also raises an important question as to whether or not this massacre should be documented in history as a kind of ethnic cleansing (p. 19). Virdee’s account brings the attention of readers to an overlooked reality of inherent historical inaccuracy, which is one of the issues that this ongoing research addresses. Scholars like Tarun Saint and Bhaskar Sarkar (Mahn and Murphy, 2018) argue that this event of partition sets itself in a much larger context of the history of violence that reappears and is relived whenever there is an incident involving mass violence. Over the years, scholars have recognized partition as the “unfinished . . . Postcolonial burden” (p. 4) which is remembered and felt all over again every time an act of violence is experienced by the people of India and Pakistan. An important question that the authors raise is how literature at times fails to encapsulate the political agendas behind the events. They elaborate the argument by explaining that although literary imagination is a way to fill out the gaps left by the historians, there is a chance of missing out the hidden politics behind the events and fall prey to the accusations of inauthenticity (p. 8). This work urges the readers to view Partition not merely as a nostalgic past, but rather as a constantly unfolding present, “functioning to structure experience through a past that continues to change the present in terms of how it is narrated, commemorated and referred to” (Mahn & Murphy, 2018. p. 9). The current research, alive to the gaps available in the contemporary scholarship, builds its arguments upon and beyond the

forementioned works, either in agreement or against, and explores the complicated terrain of fact versus fiction.

There have been numerous qualitative approaches that deal with the analysis of storytelling, including life history research, narrative inquiry, ethnography and autoethnography, . In this kind of research, the narrative can be present in the form of existing data, an analytical mode, or simply a form in which the analyzed data is later represented (Dwyer, Ian & elke, 2017). As Dwyer, Ian & elke suggest in their collective endeavor “Narrative Research in Practice—Stories from the Field” (2017), “[t]he inquiry may focus on the experiences of the individual, or seek to illuminate larger scale social narratives” (p.2). The scope of the ongoing project is the latter one, i.e. “seek[ing] to illuminate larger scale social narratives” (p.2) in the backdrop of the master-narrative of the Partition of undivided India. For this purpose, the researcher has selected *Freedom at Midnight* (1975) by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre along with its screen adaptation entitled *Viceroy’s House* (2017) directed and produced by Gurinder Chadha. Both these narratives, textual and visual, have been selected due to their massive popularity as well as their controversiality in the context of Indian partition.

The current study borrows strands from the broader framework of Narrative Research (NR), using the tools of Thematic Networks (Stirling, 2001) and appropriates it to the analysis of visual narratives. Traditionally, NR has mostly been used to collect and analyze individual experiences of people through the interaction of the researcher and the participants. It focuses on the interpretation of the world through the lens of individuals and also evaluates how people construct identities through their narratives. Literary research has mostly benefitted from either critical theory or other research methods for the purpose of obtaining analysis, yet the theme, purpose and nature of this current research is aligned with the analytical quality of NR as a method. It has the flexibility to cater both the textual as well as the visual narratives for literary and film research. The textual and visual narratives are taken as reinterpretations of authors and the directors, and are analyzed as their individual understanding of the historical account of Partition of India.

Borrowing from Jennifer Attride-Stirling’s work on Thematic Networks (2001), the current research seeks to appropriate the analytical method to the study of Chadha’s adaptation of the Partition event as “Viceroy’s House.” Application of thematic networks is a convenient and straightforward way of organization of thematic analysis in any kind of qualitative research. It unearths the salient themes in a textual data, consequently facilitating an apt structure and depiction of the narrative. Thematic analysis is a well-established analytical tool in qualitative research, especially concerning the written data or scripts.

In the process of moving from text to its interpretation, the thematic networks facilitate the representation by offering web-like networks of meaning and elucidation. The systematic organization of these thematic networks are divided into the following, as explained by Stirling (2001):

- i) Basic Themes: The evident and lowest-order premises in a text.

ii) Organizing Themes: Group of basic themes coupled together to form another abstract principle.

iii) Global Themes: The master-narratives or super-ordinate themes in the text.

These themes, once identified and extracted from the text, are represented in the thematic maps at the above-mentioned three levels. These thematic networks do not pretend to discover the origins of history or an argument, nor do they lay any claim to the final rationalizations; rather, they seek to break up a text in a way that its explicit and implicit substance is exposed (Stirling, p. 388).

### ***Freedom at Midnight: Glorifying the Empire***

An important narrative in partition studies, *Freedom at Midnight* (1975) is a joint American-French venture by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre. It is primarily a non-fictional historical book which is written with the imagination and convenience of a novel. Most of the chapters seems like a collection of short stories with real characters and events and covers the years 1947 to 1948, which is the period immediately before and after partition of India. The book claims to be an objective historical record of Indian partition, containing illustrations and maps from the authors' personal archives, and later inspired Gurinder Chadha's British film *Viceroy's House*. Collins and Lapierre's book is considered a well-researched account of partition by many critics and readers, yet the book comes with its fair share of criticism. It has been widely criticized by many as an undue and unfair glorification of Louis Mountbatten and belittling of Muslim leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah. One of the reasons why many readers consider *Freedom at Midnight* (1975) as an impartial record is mainly because the authors belong to neither of the major entities involved in the partition of India, which automatically leads to an assumption that they have no emotional stakes involved in the book. This stance, however, can be argued on many levels. While there is no doubt on the time and effort invested in researching the content of this book, the fact cannot be contested that it still is a *narrative*—Louis Mountbatten's narrative. In fiction, a narrative is a way in which the author decides to tell a particular story, which then determines the tone and reception of the events and persons being described. Collins and Lapierre's account is undoubtedly inclined in favor of Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, and absolves him of all or any guilt pertaining to massive bloodshed and abrupt, illogical division of the Indian subcontinent.

This lengthy book merely covers a timeline of one year, six months before and six months after India's partition, which begins with negotiations between different local political parties and the British government and ends with Gandhi's assassination in 1948. The narrative of this book is a fascinating read but should be treated with care and due skepticism. Leonard Abraham Gordon, a distinctive historian of South Asia and an emeritus professor of history in the United States, wrote his impressions of *Freedom at Midnight* (1975) soon after the book was published. His review brought *Freedom at Midnight* (1975) down from the high pedestal it was resting upon,

and placed it under tight scrutiny. Commenting on the popularity of this book, Gordon (1976) wrote, “It has received a publicity campaign unprecedented for a book about India, and so one is led to ask what new truths are to be found in it?” (p. 702). Rightly so, there are barely any new and crucial pieces of historic information in the book but plenty of melodrama, fiction and conspiracy theories. T. A. Mathias’ (1976) review in a Philadelphia based newspaper *America* notes how the authors interviewed ‘every living person’ who was involved in the partition of India in 1947, while ironically, Louis Mountbatten was the only surviving person from the event in question, and also the only major source for Collins and Lapierre’s historic venture. He further observes that no matter how vivid the interview method seems, it “inevitably lacks depth and accuracy—especially if the history is written 28 years later”, when the major individuals involved in the occurrence are either dead or too old to recall the events correctly (Mathias, 1976). He notes that “The book is colored by Mountbatten’s view of events; and in spite of his nobility of outlook and fairness, he is essentially a view from the top, a British perspective” (Mathias, 1976). Neville Maxwell (1975) also suggests in *The New York Review of Books* that “One of the deadliest traps for the writer of contemporary history is the informant who is just too good” (Maxwell, 1975). He further comments on the authors’ meeting with Louis Mountbatten as, “when these authors found such an informant across the French ambassador’s table in London, they must have felt that their intended work on the independence and partition of India was already almost done, and safely on the best-seller lists” (Maxwell, 1975). He criticizes Collins and Lapierre for relying solely on Mountbatten’s words, as he constantly referred to his notes and papers. Maxwell highlights that, according to Collins and Lapierre’s own notes in the book, it was Mountbatten who consulted those so-called papers, and not the authors themselves (Maxwell, 1975).

As mentioned earlier, Collins and Lapierre’s non-fictional narrative *Freedom at Midnight* (1975) provides backdrop, material and inspiration to Gurinder Chadha’s film *Viceroy’s House*. Collins and Lapierre begin their book by quoting Rudyard Kipling’s famous imperialist opinions, almost sickening to many, saying, “The responsibility for governing India has been placed by the inscrutable decree of providence upon the shoulders of the British race” (as cited in Collins and Lapierre, 1975). This is not the only shock for the twenty-first century reader because, immediately after turning the page, the first chapter of the book is titled as “A Race Destined to Govern and Subdue” (Collins and Lapierre, 1975, p. 3). The initial impression is that the authors of the book are probably trying to be sarcastic. This assumption is soon altered when the reader finds a lengthy space dedicated to the grandeur and heroic descriptions of Viscount Mountbatten of Burma, and the last Viceroy of India, Mr. Louis Mountbatten; and the authors then also justify the need for British rule in India throughout the book. There is a clear undertone in the narrative that the British had acquired India as their God-given duty. Collins and Lapierre (1975) seem to suggest that once faced with the dilemma of division of India, it was now Mountbatten’s responsibility to save that country from its own people. By the end of the narrative, British government and Mountbatten are freed from the charges of

mishandling the division of India, and it is implied that they were helpless in the hands of fate and historical inevitability. As a modern reader, who has grown conscious to the sensitivities of slavery, racism, bigotry and colonialism, one cannot expect a sympathetic portrait of the Indian partition history from this book. It is also important to note that the book was written in the dark age of postcolonial awareness—before the establishment of postcolonial studies and three years before Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, when people were still trying to recover from their mental colonization and after-effects of two hundred years of British rule in India.

Collins and Lapierre (1975) dedicate page after page to the description of the thriving British rule in India. The imagery and scenic details are undoubtedly matchless for a book of history, but in the process of doing so, they also end up unjustly glorifying the presence of British in India. The authors chalk out the details of how the officers of the East India Trading Company had no intention to take over the territory and that their slogan at that time was “Trade, not territory”; and the Indian Moghul royalty also welcomed them in their houses (Collins and Lapierre, p. 11). However, as their business started to grow, the poor East India Company had no option but to interfere in local politics “in order to protect their expanding commerce, [and] to intervene in the squabbles of the petty sovereigns on whose territories they operated” (p. 11). The book gives an impression that the East India Company was out of the British government and the Crown’s hands, and that it took critical decisions on its own. The authors continue to minimize the blame by affirming that from day one Britain had an intent “to relinquish the possessions she had so inadvertently acquired” (p. 11-12). Authors’ choice of words in the narrative itself is problematic. Britain had not acquired India, but had taken over by systemic conspiracy via the East India Trading Company, snatching a country from its own people.

While providing the context of “the Honorable” East India Company, as mentioned in the book, and how its rule brought prosperity to India, the authors write, “British rule nonetheless brought India benefits of considerable magnitude” and gave her the greatest gift in the form of English language . . . and modern sports, of course (Collins and Lapierre, p. 12-15). These English rulers were fair and talented and, according to the authors, “with an occasional exception they were able and incorruptible, determined to administer India in its own best interests”, but thankfully, in the immediate next sentence, the authors do realize that those ‘interests’ were determined by the British and not Indians themselves (p. 16). Gordon (1976) makes an important observation, unfolding how glorification of the Raj in the narrative provides an insight into Collins and Lapierre’s historical methodology in the book. He categorizes their method as “condensation, personalization and trivialization” (p. 702). He explains how the authors provide a prejudiced context of India’s cruel and primitive ways, which in reality are proud cultural and religious values of the subcontinent. They then provide a romanticized account of the British Raj, which brought civility to India. He argues that, “Their sketch of the British Raj comes straight out of the pages of Kipling” who was a well-known imperialist (p. 702).

Mountbatten's physical descriptions are also in line with a fictional narrative outline. For instance, Collins and Lapierre write: "[A]t 46 . . . not a trace of flab hung from his zealously exercised waistline. . . . Despite the terrible burdens he'd carried, the face . . . was remarkably free of the scars of strain and tension" (Collins and Lapierre, p. 6). It is immediately evident from the opening chapter that the authors have obvious likeness for Mountbatten and have decided to portray him as the hero of the narrative—almost like a Greek god: "His features, so astonishingly regular that they seemed to have been conceived as a prototype of facial design . . . his undiminished shock of dark hair setting off his hazel eyes", which apparently made him look five years younger than he actually was (p. 6). The book provides heroic details of how Louis Mountbatten accepted an impossible task of negotiating with the stubborn and unreasonable Indian leaders and replaced Lord Wavell's "Operation Madhouse" with his own "Operation Seduction", and charmed every one of the Indian leaders with his personality and charisma one by one (p. 78). Muhammad Ali Jinnah was the only leader, Mountbatten's operation seduction did not work on. He ordered to change the color of the viceregal study from dark and gloomy to cheerful and bright so that it could relax the Indian political leaders whom he had to meet in that room for serious negotiations (p. 78). Edwina Mountbatten took an even more revolutionary step by ordering the viceregal kitchen to prepare traditional Indian vegetarian dishes for their Indian guests and then to be served in the traditional Indian flat trays. According to Collins and Lapierre (1975), the self-proclaimed hero of the narrative, Louis Mountbatten had soon won the love and affection of Indian people, as they saw him as a "deliverer and not a conqueror" (p. 80). By that time, the Viceroy and his wife had also won the affection of an influential Congress leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, who admitted at one point that it had become harder to negotiate with Mountbatten due to the fandom he had acquired in India (p. 80).

Both Jinnah and the pre-partition violence have repeatedly been used as a justification for Mountbatten's haste towards the division of India. The violence, too, in its most stereotypical expression, is mostly initiated by the Muslims in the narrative. On one occasion, the authors note how "A Muslim horde had descended on the village like a wolf pack", setting the Hindu and Sikh houses on fire, and provide graphic imagery where "A few Hindu women, hauled from their beds to be raped and converted to Islam" (p. 117-118). The authors completely ignore the fact that Hindu and Sikh mobs also did the same to Muslim women and that the pages of partition history are covered in blood, irrespective of the religious affiliations. Sadly, the tone that Collins and Lapierre (1975) maintain throughout the book, especially with reference to Louis Mountbatten, is that of his personal biographers and historians. Certain sentences and expressions almost have an ironically comic extravagance to them. While describing Mountbatten's first formal meeting with Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the authors cannot help but fictionalize: "Then, with his legendary charm and verve, Mountbatten turned the focus of Operation Seduction on the Moslem leader. Jinnah froze" (p. 100). A critical reader would ask Collins and Lapierre the following questions: Did they witness the meeting between Mountbatten and Jinnah themselves? Who was their source? Who



provided them with such keen descriptions of how Jinnah reacted and how Mountbatten supposedly waved his magic wand at him? The answer to these questions is very much present within the narrative itself. The authors have provided details of sources used for each chapter in the appendix of the book. Mountbatten provided at least 80 percent of the material for the narrative with over thirty hours of recorded interviews and his own collection of memories from the Mountbatten Papers. The instances of this sort, present throughout the narrative, raise reasonable questions on the reliability of the accounts and situate this narrative within historical revisionism. It is a narrative that claims to be historic in nature but, at the same time, swings in the middle of history and fiction through its novelistic recital.

In his interview with *India Today* in 1976, Dominique Lapierre's justification for keeping Mountbatten at the forefront of their historical book was that "Your own Government led by one of the greatest leaders of the world, Nehru, had the extraordinary political wisdom, intelligence and courage, to ask the last Viceroy of India to become the first Governor-General of independent India" (Sethi, 1976/2015). Leonard A. Gordon (1976), in his review of the book, remarks that this narrative portrays Lord Mountbatten as someone who equally handed over justice. Commenting on how the narrative seems to imply that Mountbatten never made any mistakes, Gordon writes, "The authors mention criticisms of Mountbatten, but quickly dismiss them without further scrutiny" (Gordon, 1976, p. 702). He further comments that, "Since Lord Mountbatten was bountiful with his time and papers, a good deal of narrative circles around him. Thus, we get the God's-eye view of the events, presented uncritically" (p. 702).

### ***Viceroy's House: A servile pantomime***

Gurinder Chadha's film "Viceroy's House" (2017) is inspired by two non-fiction historical works on the Partition of the subcontinent, namely "Freedom at Midnight" (Collins, L. & Lapierre, D., 1976) and "The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition" (Sarila, N. S., 2005), none of which addresses the Pakistani perspective on the event of Partition; with the former being an American-French outlook of the story and the latter, Indian. Chadha's adaptation itself is a British-Indian take on the historical happenings of 1947. The reason is that she is of British origin and the film is made by a team of British and American producers and screenplay writers. Later, it has been produced by BBC films. The film largely focuses on a limited timeframe of the whole Partition saga, beginning with the arrival of Louis Mountbatten in India as its last Viceroy to plan the Partition.

Fatima Bhutto, an author, political commentator and critic, writes in her evaluation of the film that she "watched this servile pantomime and wept" (Bhutto, 2017). Bhutto comments that the film's menacing opening sentence stating that "History is written by the victor" is ironically very true because "the empire and its descendants have their fingerprints all over this story" (Bhutto, 2017). Lord Mountbatten, also nicknamed as Dickie, is seen burning the midnight oil, worrying about the future of India, tells his valets that he does not want to spend more than two

minutes dressing up, which, in Fatima Bhutto's words, is "fitting for the man who dismembered India in less than six weeks" (Bhutto, 2017). The valets, acting quickly upon Mountbatten's orders, still dress him up in thirteen minutes and "as always, it is the Indians, not the British, who fail in the simplest of tasks set out for them" (Bhutto, 2017). All these details are inspired by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre's *Freedom at Midnight* (1975)—primarily a non-fictional historical book which is written with the imagination and convenience of a novel. The book claims to be an objective historical record of Indian partition, containing illustrations and maps from the authors' personal archives, which, in reality, are Louis Mountbatten's archives. It has been widely criticized by many as an undue and unfair glorification of Louis Mountbatten and belittling of Muslim leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The authors interviewed 'every living person' who was involved in the partition of India in 1947, while ironically, Louis Mountbatten was the only surviving person from the event in question, and also the only major source for Collins and Lapierre's historic venture. Mathias (1976) agrees that the biggest weakness of this book lies in the fact that it completely relies on the memories and personal account of one person. He thinks that it is a pity for the Indian partition history that Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru, Liaquat Ali Khan and other important personalities could not provide their own insights for this work to grant balance of perspective which is essential for a book that confidently situates itself into history (Mathias, 1976).

In Chadha's adaptation, Lady Mountbatten, Edwina, is also portrayed in an exceedingly sympathetic light, an instance of which is rare in the documented history. She is seen constantly concerned about the ordinary Indians and their welfare. She remarks: "Almost half of the babies born, die before they're five; that cannot be the legacy that the British leave India after three centuries" (Chadha, 2017). She is frequently seen visiting the royal kitchen, interacting with chefs and servants, telling them that she wants "more Indians, of all faiths, around her table" and wants their dietary needs [sic] be taken care of (Chadha, 2017). Their daughter, Pamela, is also seen freely mixing up with the Indians in their servant compounds; with everyone remarking that no Englishman or woman has ever stepped in their compounds before. When the communal riots spread out, the whole Mountbatten family is shown to be visiting burning sites and communities in person. According to Chadha's perspective of the Partition event, it were Muslims who initiated violence, unrest and bloodshed in India—a message that is not explicitly delivered in the film, yet is evident from every other scene, as will be discussed and quoted later.

Going through the whole structure of the narrative of this film, the following codes and themes are derived to be further reflected in their respective Thematic Networks:

**Table-1: From Codes to Themes**

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Themes Identified</b>
Contrasts	British royalty / Indian poverty White magnanimity/ Brown misconduct Reason/ Emotion Peace/ Violence Love/ Hatred British manners and cutlery/ Gandhi's goat curd
Narrative Identities/ Self-Positioning	A colonial narrative Royal perspective "History is written by the victor!" At the center
Positioning "Others"	Browns on the margins: Impatient, Unreasonable, Impulsive, Violent Conspiracy theory: Churchill and Jinnah conspired
Image Rectification	The Mountbatten Family: Benevolent, Concerned, Sincere
Partition Tropes	India suffered at its own hands Muslims wanted partition Muslims initiated violence Jinnah triggered Partition
Religious Tropes	Muslims and Hindus hated each other Sikhs and Muslims hated each other Muslims as rigid and harsh
Political Tropes	British sanity Indian Irrationality Sharp Indian Tongues (Taught at Cambridge)

Blame of Blood	The “other” is always responsible Shift of blame National catharsis
Love Triangles	Jeet Singh, Aalia and Asif (Explicit) Dickie, Edwina and Nehru (Discreet)
Binaries	Primitive versus Civilized Brown versus White Good versus Bad
White Burden	The British dilemma / Mountbatten’s burden Giving a country back to its people Mountbatten came to free India Mountbatten freed Burma
Comic Representations	Comic disrespect for Indian Politicians Absurd portrayal of Indian librarians / servants
Troublemakers	Jinnah Winston Churchill Muslims
Communal Violence	The Delhi Riots The Lahore Riots The Punjab Riots
Cambridge	“Sharpened Freedom-Fighting Tongues”
Deception	Mountbatten deceived by Churchill Mountbatten deceived by Radcliff Mountbatten deceived by Hastings Ismay
Anger	Anger of Muslims Anger of Jinnah Anger of Nehru

	Anger of Patel The in-house servants
Plight of Masses	Big guns making decisions for a nation
Interlocutors	The Mountbattens British Government The Royalty
Partition Celebrations	There was no celebration of Partition for people who lost loved ones. Gandhi did not celebrate the announcement of Partition.

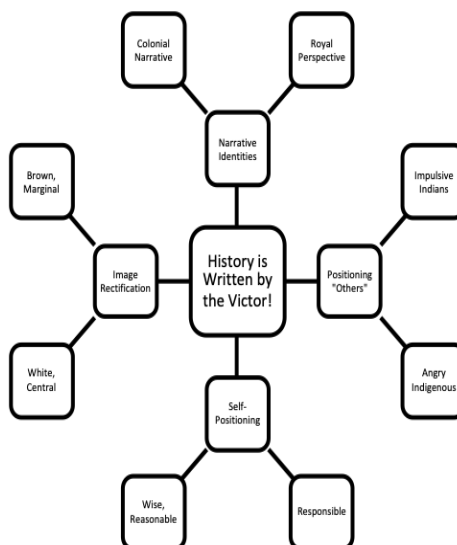
**Table-2: From Basic to Organizing to Global Themes**

<b>Basic Themes</b>	<b>Organizing Themes</b>	<b>Global Themes</b>
Impatient Natives Unreasonable Indians Impulsive/ violent Indigenous A colonial narrative Royal perspective White at the Center; Brown at the Margin	Positioning “Others”  Narrative Identities  Image Rectification Self-positioning	History is written by the victor!
Muslims wanted partition Muslims initiated violence Jinnah triggered Partition Muslims and Hindus hated each other Sikhs and Muslims hated each other Muslims as rigid and harsh	Partition Tropes  Religious Tropes	The Narrative of Blame— India suffered at its own hands

<p>British sanity                  Indian Irrationality                  Sharp Indian Tongues                  Jeet Singh, Aalia and Asif (Explicit)                  Dickie, Edwina and Nehru (Discreet)</p>	<p>Political Tropes                   Relationship Tropes</p>	
<p>Mountbatten's burden                  Mountbatten came to free India                  Mountbatten freed Burma                   Mountbatten deceived by Churchill, Radcliff and Hastings Ismay                  Comic portrayal of Indian politicians</p>	<p>The Interlocutors                  The British dilemma                   Deception of the Fair                   The political farce</p>	<p>The White Man's Burden</p>

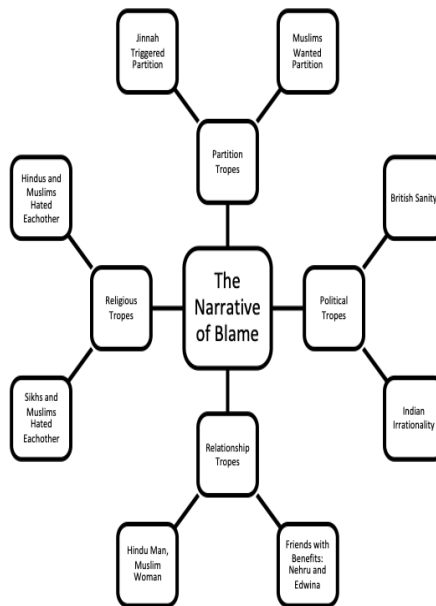
Carefully inferring from the above-sought codes and themes, the following three thematic networks are structured to depict the embedded themes and agendas in the partition narratives under discussion:

**Fig:1 Thematic Network-1**



The striking contrast between the British magnificence and Indian primitiveness is shown in each and every scene right from the beginning; as aptly described by Raja Sen in his review: “[L]eaving India to its own devices is, as Chadha’s film explains, a kindness done to the country by the British, after first having so benevolently sharpened our freedom-fighting tongues at Cambridge” (Sen, 2019). There is a parallel plot running in the film about the love affair between a Hindu man and a Muslim girl, the likelihood of which is also repeatedly mocked and questioned by many critics, that too within the strict rules of the Viceroy’s House. Andrew Roberts, in *The Churchill Project*, asserts that the film “combines Bollywood romance with a good deal of period character. But whenever it gets involved in partition politics, it is historically and politically repugnant, promoting conspiracy theories and peddling vile falsehoods” (Roberts, 2017).

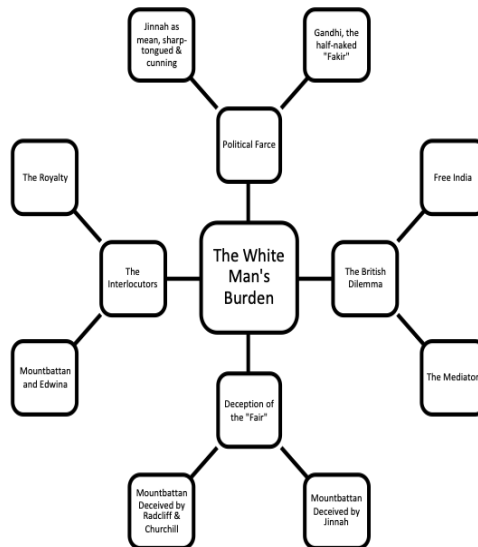
**Fig:2 Thematic Network-2**



The portrayal of the Indian politicians in the movie is also problematic and has been a subject of bitter debate among the historians and film critics. The revolutionary leaders, be it Jinnah, Gandhi, or Nehru, “are portrayed with a comic disrespect” (Bhutto, 2017), who cannot seem to have a single civilized dialogue with one another on the table, and have to be constantly patronized by Lord Mountbatten and be repeatedly reminded that it was Cambridge that sharpened their tongues and made them clever. The film delivers evident anti-Muslim sentiments throughout its course. The viewer is told through the characters that three hundred million Hindus and Sikhs longed for a united country, boldly implicating that one hundred Muslims did not want the same. Bhutto further comments, “Mirroring the fractures of modern nationalism wrought by India’s partition, Chadha seems to take pleasure in laying the bloodshed and brutality of 1947 at the feet of two particular villains: Muslims and Jinnah (Bhutto, 2017). In one of the scenes of Mountbatten’s initial meetings with the Congress leader Jawaharlal Nehru, Nehru exclaims, “I have spent nine years of my life in British jails, but I believe in your sincerity Dickie, and I believe that you love my country. Don’t let Jinnah persuade you to tear it in two” (Chadha, 2017).

**Fig:3 Thematic Network-3**





The film inadequately challenges the set historical narratives on the Partition of the Subcontinent and Mountbatten’s role in it. From the beginning of the story, a larger-than-life aura is established for the Mountbatten family. The protagonist Jeet Kumar argues with his other servant-colleagues and remarks expectantly, “Mountbatten Sahib is a great man. He freed Burma— now he is coming to free India” (Chadha, 2017). Chadha’s film gives a feeling that “Freedom is not something fought and won by Indians; it is a gift from the Mountbattens and the empire they represent” (Bhutto, 2017). This is followed by Mountbattens’ lavish flight in a chartered plane and their exalted entrance in the palace-looking Delhi Mansion. Seeing her father sulking over the heavy responsibility thrust upon his shoulders, Mountbatten’s daughter Pamela exclaims, “You are giving a nation back to its people—how hard can it be?” (Chadha, 2017). The follow up scenes also build upon the narrative of glorification of the Mountbatten family throughout the film, much of which has been adapted from *Freedom at Midnight* (1976).

The generosity and benevolence of the Mountbatten family, which is a symbolic representation of the British Raj, is presented throughout the film. The viewer is informed by the servants that the British decided to leave because they were exhausted by the Second World War. Bhutto also emphasizes on how “[t]here is no mention of the freedom struggle, Gandhian civil disobedience and resistance that brought the empire to its knees without firing a shot” (Bhutto, 2017). The film also fails to mention the imprisonment of all the independence leaders, their successful political and economic boycotts, and even avoids the crucial historical episode of Gandhi’s planned assassination—which is described in detail by Collins and Lapierre in *Freedom at Midnight* (1976). Edwina repeatedly whispers in Mountbatten’s ears that they have

come to free India and not tear her apart, as if it were some other creature, and not the British, who forcefully occupied and ruled India for three hundred years. There is this recurrently hovering “insidious message cloaked behind every line in this unctuous and craven film: India’s suffering is India’s fault” (Bhutto, 2017). The whole blame is slowly taken away from Lord Mountbatten as Edwina soothes him, saying “This tragedy is not of your making” (Chadha, 2017).

Another important entity involved in the making of the film is the family of Narendra Singh Sarila, the Prince of Sarila and ADC (aide-de-camp) to Lord Mountbatten at the time of Partition. N. S. Sarila is also the author of *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India’s Partition* (2005), a book which the film *Viceroy’s House* (Chadha, 2017) claims to be based on. Sarila provided all the documents and his book to Gurinder Chadha for the making of the film but passed away years before it was released. N.S. Sarila’s wife, Shefali Singh—otherwise known as Rani Juni of Sarila, rejects the film as inauthentic, fraudulent and misleading stating “I’m glad my husband is not alive to see Gurinder Chadha’s film. It would have given him a heart attack!” (Saran, 2017). Rani Juni is particularly disappointed at the “Chaprasi-like” portrayal of Viceroy’s Aide in the film—a position which was of high reverence and responsibility (Saran, 2017). The depiction of primitive and barbaric Indian servants in the Viceroy’s House is also intimidating and offensive to many. They are shown brawling and spitting on each other, as if the only civilized human beings present in that household were the British. “It is the director’s imagination, and far from reality, and that is not allowed in a historical narrative, based on a time so close to the present”, laments Rani Juni (Saran, 2017).

Andrew Roberts writes for *The Churchill Project* and has a standpoint of his own pertaining to the film *Viceroy’s House*. In his opinion, the film pardons Lord Mountbatten of all his crimes and thrusts all the blame on Winston Churchill—a detail that mainly comes from N. S. Sarila’s book *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India’s Partition* (2005). “Without any evidence” writes Roberts, “it blames Sir Winston Churchill and his faithful, honest wartime military secretary Hastings Ismay of being responsible for the massacres of innocent. . . . Yet it absolves from blame the man who was primarily responsible—Louis Mountbatten himself” (Roberts, 2017). Edwina’s relationship with Jawaharlal Nehru is also kept out of sight in the movie, which is now a historically known and acknowledged fact. Besides a few discreet glances between Nehru and Edwina, nothing has been shown or mentioned in the movie. Robert notes that “[i]n the film, however, there is not the tiniest hint that Edwina was having an affair with Nehru—which understandably aroused suspicions among Muslims, who feared Nehru had a big influence over the Viceroy”, writes Roberts (2017). Their close affiliation has also been excluded from Collins and Lapierre’s (1975) narrative which, in fact, is Mountbatten’s own version of events.

## Conclusion

This research paper puts forward two very significant questions in the beginning that revolving around the textual/ visual portrayal of events of historical sensitivity. It was probed whether or not the visual adaptations of certain historical narratives or records make any further effort to revise the historical anomalies present in them. In the contemporary era, the medium of film attracts far greater viewership than a book does. With a leverage of this kind, it becomes a moral responsibility of a director or a screenplay writer to address the historical inconsistencies present in the text and make an effort to highlight them as such, if not alter. This is especially expected of creative works that claim to be true to history. This investigation shows that no such measures have been taken by the directing and producing team of *Viceroy's House* regarding a highly sensitive and crucial historical catastrophe of the Partition of the subcontinent. Rather, in an attempt to romanticize and reimagine the event itself, the film ended up distorting multiple established historical facts, widely recognized and researched. The second question that this research raised was about the possible problematization of the historical records and occurrences when told through any of the aesthetic mediums. The analysis of the given visual narrative also shows that the auteur/director of the film took liberties with the historical knowledge in an attempt to sell a particular version of history to the audience—a version which completely missed a Muslim Indian or a Pakistani perspective in it.

In fiction, a narrative is a way in which the author decides to tell a particular story, which then determines the tone and reception of the events and persons being described. Collins and Lapierre's (1975) account is undoubtedly inclined in favor of Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, and absolves him of all or any guilt pertaining to massive bloodshed and abrupt, illogical division of the Indian subcontinent. Chadha (2017), unfortunately, takes up the same narrative and adapts it on screen to further strengthen *the Mountbatten version* of Partition. This research was taken up with an aim to initiate a dialogue within the disciplines of historical fiction and adaptation studies in order to eventually reach a consensus about the protocols, amount of research, literary aesthetics and scope of reimagination in case of adapting history on paper or screen.

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