



BEYOND BORDERS, BEYOND HATE: PUNJABI CINEMA AS A *THIRD SPACE* FOR RECLAIMING THE LOST HARMONY OF THE PRE-PARTITION ERA

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Abstract

The prospect of cultural reconciliation between India and Pakistan remains overshadowed by the enduring colonial legacy, particularly the trauma of Partition and its divisive impact on shared identities. This study explores how Punjabi cinema portrays colonial history and its enduring impact, focusing on *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* (2024) and *Toba Tek Singh* (2018), the latter of which is based on Saadat Hasan Manto's renowned short story. By engaging with Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space theory, we argue that Punjabi cinema serves as a site of cultural and cinematic hybridity, fostering unity through the representation of shared heritage and rejecting colonial-imposed binaries. The analysis section of this study reveals that *Toba Tek Singh* portrays how Partition transformed once-harmonious communities into sites of division, where identities were forcefully aligned with nation and religion—an outcome of colonial intervention that disrupted the fluidity of cultural belonging. In contrast, *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* presents a vision of coexistence, depicting Indo-Pakistani characters living and eating together, reviving the unity that existed before Partition. Both films illustrate that it was colonial rule that strategically manufactured divisions between Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, 'to serve imperial interests' (Communist Ghadar Party of India 2022). This, in turn, creates a space where India and Pakistan can recognize their shared heritage, challenging colonial narratives that continue to shape contemporary divisions.

Keywords: *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee, Partition, Punjabi Cinema, Third Space, Toba Tek Singh.*

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1. Introduction

The profound enduring hatred and enmity between India and Pakistan, which has been nurtured by the trauma of the Partition process, remains a key determining factor in politics and culture of both countries. Here, Punjabi cinema serves as a powerful medium for exploring the enduring legacies of colonialism and the ‘cultural fragmentation caused by Partition’ (Ghosh 2025, 1). The representation of shared histories in films such as *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* and *Toba Tek Singh* reflects an attempt to reconcile the divisions imposed by colonial rule. For this, Homi K. Bhabha’s Third Space theory provides a crucial framework for understanding how these films construct a space of hybridity, where cultural boundaries are blurred and redefined. This hybridity, as Hèla Yousfi describes, involves ‘replacing domination and cultural essentialism by mutual contamination, subversion and ambivalence’ (2014, 394). This, in turn, enables the films to resist binary oppositions between India and Pakistan, thereby subverting rigid dichotomies and fostering a multifaceted, transnational cultural terrain. Bhabha asserts that colonial discourse constructs rigid categories of identity, reinforcing separation and otherness (Bhabha 2001, 389). However, cultural hybridity disrupts these imposed boundaries, allowing for the emergence of a shared space where historical and cultural exchanges redefine identity beyond nationalistic divides (Kuortti 2023, 90; Yazdiha 2010, 32). By depicting characters who navigate this liminal space, Punjabi cinema functions as a Third Space, challenging colonial narratives and fostering a reimagined sense of unity.

Punjabi cinema has emerged as a powerful medium for revisiting historical narratives and challenging colonial-imposed divisions. *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* and *Toba Tek Singh* explore the complexities of Indo-Pakistani relations, focusing on the cultural and emotional aftermath of Partition. While *Toba Tek Singh* highlights the forced separation and identity crisis caused by Partition, *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* envisions a world where shared cultural traditions transcend political boundaries. Both films examine the stark contrast between pre-Partition harmony and the post-Partition tensions that continue to shape the region. By addressing these historical wounds, they challenge fabricated colonial ideologies that, as Zamindar (2007) states, ‘shaped ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ identities’ (quoted in Robinson 2010, 79). Through this cinematic exploration, Punjabi cinema evolves into a liminal space that resists colonial ideologies and promotes the reclamation of lost harmony between India and Pakistan.

This article approaches the Punjabi films as a cinematic counter-narrative, as they articulate the same theme of challenging colonial-imposed divisions and fostering cultural reconciliation between India and Pakistan. The selected two films can be read as a cinematic dialogue that reconstructs the historical and emotional impact of Partition—*Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* and *Toba Tek Singh* both address the disruption of shared heritage and the artificial binaries imposed by colonial rule. These films emphasize the contrast between

pre-Partition harmony and post-Partition tensions, urging a reexamination of how cultural and national identities have been shaped by colonial interventions. *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* and *Toba Tek Singh* explore the historical and emotional impact of Partition, examining how colonial interventions created artificial divisions that disrupted the once-fluid cultural and social fabric of the region. While *Toba Tek Singh* portrays the trauma of forced separation through the lens of Manto's short story, highlighting the absurdity of borders that divide people who once lived as one, *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* envisions a possibility for reconciliation by depicting love and shared cultural traditions that transcend national boundaries. These films serve as cinematic counter-narratives that reject the binaries imposed by colonialism and instead emphasize the deep-rooted connections between people across the Indo-Pak border.

The power of cinema in bridging these historical divides and the exploration of the colonial past, is emphasized by *Toba Tek Singh's* director Ketan Mehta (2018, 0:21/1:13:11), who states, 'bringing together creative talents from India and Pakistan on the same platform and sharing their creative visions through an exchange of ideas and inspirations can go a long way in bringing peace and understanding in this subcontinent'. By featuring a shared cinematic space where Indian and Pakistani artists collaborate, the film itself becomes a Third Space—what Bhabha describes as a site of cultural hybridity that resists imposed binaries and creates a new narrative of unity. Similarly, *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* offers a hopeful vision of a future where the political hostility that divides Punjab is dismantled. The directors, Deepak Thaper and Nasir Zaman (2024, 2:00:28/2:01:12), capture this sentiment through a key dialogue of Ali and Sabi: 'will this dream ever become a reality, brother?... It will certainly become true as soon as the politics filled with hatred ends...the two parts of Punjab [India-Pakistan] will reunite...Ali will never have to lie to Meher again'. This moment encapsulates the longing for unity that defines both films, presenting a vision of a borderless Punjab where cultural ties outweigh the divisions enforced by political agendas.

What binds these films together is their shared thematic resistance to colonial legacies of division and their reclamation of pre-Partition harmony. Through *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* and *Toba Tek Singh*, Punjabi cinema disrupts the rigid nationalistic structures that separate India and Pakistan, instead offering a narrative of cultural reconciliation. By using cinema as a Third Space, these films challenge the political and historical forces that continue to foster hostility and mistrust, providing audiences with an alternative vision—one where the shared heritage of Punjab transcends the arbitrary borders created by colonial rule.

Previous studies on *Toba Tek Singh* short story have extensively explored various themes including its depiction of public mourning and trauma (Viswanath and Malik 2009, 61), fractured identities and religious divisions (Bhaskar and Allen 2009, 112), and the

political dimensions of private emotions (Kabir 2009, 41-43). Researchers have also examined the marginalization of gendered and religious minorities in Partition narratives (Sweeney 2013, viii), as well as the representation of cross-border unity and reconciliation in contemporary South Asian films (Langah and Sengupta 2021, 203). Moreover, studies have analyzed Partition's impact on the construction of identity in the Indian subcontinent, how border formations influenced racial, religious, and cultural selfhood (Mukhopadhyay 2016, 67). The film adaptation of *Toba Tek Singh* has been discussed within the broader discourse of Partition cinema with scholars emphasizing its role in portraying displacement and the enduring psychological scars of historical trauma (Das 2024, 37). Saxena (2022) situates *Toba Tek Singh* within a lineage of Partition films that explore home, exile, and identity, aligning it with works like *Train to Pakistan* and *Pinjar*. Additionally, Grewal (2025, 249) examines how Riz Ahmed's rap adaptations of *Toba Tek Singh* reclaim the story as a metaphor for the ongoing experience of dislocation in the South Asian diaspora.

However, while *Toba Tek Singh* has been the subject of academic discussion, no scholarly research has been conducted on *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee*, marking a significant gap in the literature. The absence of academic discourse on this film indicates a lack of engagement with its themes of cross-border unity, cultural hybridity, and reconciliation, which are central to understanding contemporary Punjabi cinema's role in challenging colonial legacies. This study addresses this research gap by providing the first critical analysis of *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* alongside *Toba Tek Singh*, examining how both films challenge colonial-era divisions and reimagine a pre-Partition cultural unity that transcends borders. Unlike previous studies, which have primarily focused on themes of trauma and historical rupture, this research considers the role of Punjabi cinema as a Third Space that resists binary constructions of identity. By contextualizing *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* and *Toba Tek Singh* within the framework of cultural hybridity, this study explores how these films disrupt dominant narratives of national separation and offer a cinematic space for reconciliation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. South Asian Cinema and Post-Colonial Literature

Cinema has long functioned as a historical and ideological battleground where dominant narratives about colonialism and its aftermath are either reinforced or subverted (George 2007 cited in Shirodkar 2020, 49). Postcolonial scholars argue that film, as a visual and narrative medium, plays a critical role in shaping collective memory, challenging hegemonic structures, and reclaiming suppressed histories (Said 1993, 45; Shohat and Stam 1994, 23). According to Rice colonial-era cinema often 'served as a tool' for empire (2019, 10), portraying the colonized as exotic, subservient, or inherently violent, postcolonial cinema has sought to reverse these representations, offering counter-

narratives that expose the impact of imperialism on indigenous cultures and identities (De 2013, 323). South Asian cinema, in particular, has engaged deeply with the colonial experience, illustrating how British rule left not only economic and political scars but also psychological and cultural wounds that continue to shape post-independence societies (Daiya 2008, 153; Kabir 2009, 98).

South Asian cinema has been influenced by the Indian Partition with numerous films exploring the trauma, displacement and violence that accompanied it in the South Asian region (George 2007, 142; Mubarki 2017, 45). These films offer nuanced understandings of how the Partition shaped South Asian identity and culture. By examining cinematic texts, scholars have deepened our understanding of the relationship between historical trauma, collective memory and cultural processes in the South Asian context. The Partition of India has had a profound impact on South Asian cinema, shaping narratives of trauma, pain and shared suffering in the region. Roper argues (2000, quoted in Raychaudhuri 2019, 45), ‘personal accounts of the past are never isolated from public narratives but rather operate within their terms,’ demonstrating how individual experiences of Partition are deeply intertwined with broader cultural narratives that influence collective understanding of the event. In the context of South Asian cinema, this interplay is particularly significant as films often draw on personal accounts to create narratives that reflect the collective memory of the Partition. As Raychaudhuri noted, ‘the memorial legacy of partition... but productive in the sense that it helps to produce narratives. These take the form of literature and cinema...’ (2019, 2), highlighting the role of cultural productions like South Asian cinema in shaping and reflecting the collective memory of the Partition.

The portrayal of Partition in **South Asian cinema** shares deep connections with South Asian postcolonial literature both of which grapple with the enduring legacies of colonialism, displacement and identity (Mehta and Mookerjee-Leonard 2014, 3). Just as **South Asian films** seek to capture the emotional and social repercussions of the 1947 Partition, postcolonial writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Khushwant Singh and Bapsi Sidhwa have used literature to explore similar themes of loss, trauma and communal fragmentation (Hayat et al. 2015, 25). Saadat Hasan Manto’s short stories such as *Toba Tek Singh*, for instance provide a blunt reflection on the absurdity of Partition portraying it as an event that not only divided nations but fractured identities at their very core. As Manto writes, ‘there, behind that wire, is India. Here, behind this one, is Pakistan. But there, in the middle, on that strip of no man’s land, is Toba Tek Singh’ (2007, 19), illustrating the dislocation and confusion that individuals faced when their homes were suddenly redefined by arbitrary political borders. According to Bhabha (1994), ‘in that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and...forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting’ (9). In a similar vein, **South Asian cinema**

often engages with the emotional disorientation caused by Partition; presenting characters whose lives are irrevocably altered by the divisions imposed upon them (Sharma 2021, 19).

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* provides another literary perspective that resonates with **South Asian** films particularly in how both mediums depict the gendered violence of Partition. Sidhwa's novel centers on the experiences of women who, during the upheavals of Partition 'became victims of the most unimaginable torment including abduction, rape...and unwanted marriage' (Gautam 2022, 43), reflecting the widespread atrocities inflicted upon women during this period. This representation is corroborated by historical accounts which highlight the systematic nature of gender violence during Partition (Zamindar 2007, 7), with estimates suggesting that up to 100,000 women (Raychaudhuri 2019, 3), were abducted and raped (George 2007, 136). Similarly, films like *Pinjar* based on Amrita Pritam's novel of the same name, directly confront the gendered violence of this historical event. In *Pinjar*, the story of a Hindu woman abducted by a Muslim man is emblematic of how women's bodies were often used as battlegrounds for asserting religious and communal dominance during Partition (Sagoo 2020, 3367). The novel and film alike underscore how women were rendered doubly marginalized, first by the violence of Partition and second by the patriarchal systems that exploited them (Sagoo 2020, 3363). As Pritam (2009) writes in *Pinjar*, in every partition there are people who stand divided not just by geography but by fate and the choices forced upon them; a sentiment that is reflected in the shared narrative arcs of both cinema and literature in South Asia.

Moreover, South Asian postcolonial literature often reflects the themes of reconciliation and unity that identifies in early **South Asian cinema** where the trauma of Partition is countered by an insistence on communal harmony. This emphasis on communal harmony is rooted in the historical context of pre-colonial India, where, as Pillalamarri notes, 'most of South Asia's contemporary geopolitical and ethno-religious problems... are the result of Western influence... everyone in South Asia lived in relative harmony together before the 19th century' (2019, para. 2). This perspective suggests that the colonial legacy is a primary driver of the region's ongoing conflicts and that the themes of reconciliation and unity in postcolonial literature are, in part, a nostalgic longing for a lost era of communal peace untainted by the divisive influences of colonialism. Writers such as Khushwant Singh in *Train to Pakistan* illustrate how Partition was not only an event of division but also a reminder of the deep cultural ties that had, as Khobragade (2013, 2) notes, 'long bound communities together'. Singh's portrayal of the fictional village Mano Majra where Sikhs and Muslims had coexisted peacefully before Partition echoes the cinematic narratives of films like *Nankana* (1948) which promote the possibility of interfaith coexistence even in the face of profound socio-political disruption.

The sense of loss in Singh's narrative where characters are forced to confront the harsh realities of political separation despite their shared histories parallels the emotional tones found in films addressing Partition as both literature and cinema serve as mediums for articulating the deep longing for a return to pre-Partition harmony (Bernard 2010, 13; Raychaudhuri 2019, 45).

2.2. Punjabi Cinema as a Liminal Space Resisting Colonial Ideologies

Punjabi cinema, emerging from a region that bore the brunt of partition, has increasingly positioned itself as a space for revisiting and reinterpreting colonial histories (Das 2006, 468). Scholars note that British colonial policies in India systematically divided communities along religious and ethnic lines, embedding hostilities that ultimately facilitated the violent partition of 1947 (Talbot and Singh 2009, 134). This history is reflected in cinematic narratives that interrogate the legacy of colonial rule and its role in constructing rigid communal identities. Unlike earlier commercial films that either ignored or superficially addressed partition, contemporary Punjabi cinema is beginning to engage with the root causes of division, shifting the focus from nationalist rhetoric to colonial responsibility.

Through its evolving engagement with historical narratives, Punjabi cinema is carving out a *liminal space*—what Bhabha describes as a site of negotiation and hybridity where fixed identities are destabilized and new possibilities emerge (1994, 209). While much of postcolonial South Asian cinema has oscillated between nationalist affirmation and nostalgic lamentation, Punjabi cinema is moving toward a more critical lens, one that questions the structures that manufactured division in the first place. By foregrounding pre-colonial and syncretic cultural histories, it resists the binaries imposed by colonial rule and instead fosters a vision of shared heritage and reconciliation.

Unlike traditional post-independence films that have either passively depicted colonial trauma or reinforced nationalist ideologies, Punjabi cinema is entering a transformative phase—one that actively seeks to reclaim a lost harmony. It is no longer confined to narratives of irrevocable separation but is instead creating a space where the remnants of colonial divisions can be critically examined and, ultimately, transcended. This study employs Bhabha's concept of the Third Space to argue that Punjabi cinema, rather than merely documenting the impact of colonialism, is becoming a site of resistance, challenging inherited conflicts and reimagining a future where cultural hybridity triumphs over divisive historical legacies.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper applies a qualitative research method to examine how the *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* and *Toba Tek Singh* docufilms depict the challenges of inter-communal relations in Pakistan-India. In this respect, the Third Space Theory developed by Bhabha provides critical approaches to show the manner in which *Toba Tek Singh* and *Jee Ve*

Sohneya Jee subvert colonial legacy of fixed identity associated with nationalism, ethnicity and sectarianism. Partition, as portrayed in *Toba Tek Singh*, was a colonial construct that shattered communal harmony by enforcing strict religious and national binary distinctions, upsetting pre-existing cultural flexibility. Tayyaba Amanullah's statement that 'at the time of the Partition... Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs had coexisted peacefully in this area, but with the Partition drawing near and independence movement reaching its apex, the relations became hostile' (quoted in Tausif 2021, para 4) is one example of a historical account. On the other hand, *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* begins with characters grappling with these divisive legacies but gradually moves toward the creation of a Third Space. This space allows them to transcend colonial-imposed binaries, and reclaim a shared cultural oneness rooted in pre-Partition unity. As Mehta (2018) states, 'India and Pakistan on the same platform... can go a long way in bringing peace and understanding in this subcontinent'.

3.1. Challenging Colonial Binaries through Hybridity in *Toba Tek Singh*

In *Toba Tek Singh*, Manto employs hybridity as a narrative strategy to challenge colonial binaries, echoing Bhabha's assertion that 'hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power' but simultaneously 'unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial authority' (1994, 112). This is evident in the story's portrayal of the titular character, Toba Tek Singh, a Sikh man caught between India and Pakistan. His identity is no longer simply defined by his Sikh faith or his geographical location but is instead fragmented and complicated by the colonial legacy of division. Bhabha argues, 'an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism...' (1994, 94). However, Toba Tek Singh's existence unsettles this fixity as his hybridity resists the colonial authority's artificial imposition of binary identities. As a Sikh man, Toba Tek Singh's identity is already hybrid, emerging from what Singh describes Sikhism as 'the birth of... a combination of Islam and Hinduism' (Singh 2012, 16).

3.2. Geographical Identity and Fluid Belonging in *Toba Tek Singh*

Toba Tek Singh reflects the fragmentation of identity caused by Partition highlighting the dislocation experienced by individuals like Bishan Singh who were once free to navigate their geographical identities without the constraints of rigid national boundaries. Before Indian subcontinent was divided, people like Bishan Singh had a flexible sense of identity. They didn't think of themselves as just Indian or Pakistani. Their identity was connected to the land, not limited by the strict national labels imposed by colonialism. However, the newly created borders and the Partition of the Indian subcontinent imposed fixed cultural identities on individuals, erasing their fluid and hybrid selves. As Das et al. note, 'borders often perpetuate difference and consolidate the idea of

the nation-state' (2018, 2-3), posing a barrier to fluid belonging and highlighting the artificiality of fixed cultural identities.

3.3. Unity and Shared Heritage in *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee*

In this sense, *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* promotes unity and shared heritage by presenting a narrative that does not erase cultural differences but harmonizes them within the Third Space. As Bhabha asserts, 'the 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past...where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion' (1994, 1). The film envisions a post-Partition reconciliation by portraying characters who navigate and embrace their shared cultural histories, challenging imposed divisions.

3.4. Portrayal of Communal Harmony in *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee*

The artistic work of *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* reflects the concept of communal harmony protesting against the dichotomy of self and the other as is evident in the colonial division of the partitions. In the movie's vision of a Third Space, harmony based on common history is restored through interfaith relationships and cultural activities that transcend polarizing ideas. The film critiques colonial narratives of partition by inhabiting a Third Space, where binary oppositions are blurred. According to Bhabha, 'it makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the 'people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves' (1994, 38). By operating in this liminal space, the film challenges the dominant colonial discourse, offering a multifaceted exploration of partition that resists simplistic polarities. By portraying characters who reject imposed divisions and reclaim a heritage that predates Partition, *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* illustrates how Punjabi cinema can foster unity and reclaim the harmony lost to colonial disruptions. This vision of unity is echoed by scholars, who lament the loss of the subcontinent's cultural unity in the aftermath of Partition. As Hamdani and Maini note, 'somewhere along the way that vision was lost... a time when open and permeable borders preserved the cultural unity of the subcontinent... Pakistan and India can be there one day' (2022, 1-4).

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Challenging Colonial Binaries in *Toba Tek Singh*

Toba Tek Singh critically interrogates the binary narratives imposed by colonial powers which sought to fragment religious and national communities into rigid opposing identities. As it can be seen in the following lines from *Toba Tek Singh*:

'But soon the joy of independence was struck by the jolt of partition. While leaving the British divided India into two, India and Pakistan... By the Stroke of a pen one nation became two.'

(Mehta 2018, 27:28-27:39)

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 as depicted in *Toba Tek Singh*, was a violent and arbitrary event that fragmented a culturally hybrid society imposing rigid boundaries and redefined national identities. This colonial act of dividing India and Pakistan described as occurring *by the stroke of a pen* illustrates the destructive fixity embedded in colonial discourse. As Bhabha argues, ‘an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism...’ (1994, 66). What constructs the colonized as the ethnic or national Other is what Tyson calls ‘colonial psychology’ (2023, 438). The imposition of fixity during Partition disrupted centuries of cultural coexistence and hybridity, forcing communities into rigid religious and national categories, ultimately creating chaos and disorientation. Tyson explains that colonial psychology reinforces these rigid classifications, ensuring that once-fluid identities are redefined within exclusionary frameworks of power and hierarchy. This process of fixing identities erased shared histories and imposed artificial divisions that continue to shape postcolonial realities. The *Toba Tek Singh* film critiques this colonial legacy of division through the character of Toba Tek Singh, a Sikh man whose identity transcends simplistic binaries. His faith, a blend of Islam and Hinduism embodies the region’s culturally and religiously hybrid heritage. However, Partition’s artificial boundaries fragment this hybridity, leaving Toba Tek Singh suspended between two nations, neither of which can fully encompass his identity. The film critiques the chaos and violence resulting from the abandonment of hybridity, arguing for a return to the hybrid, interconnected identities that once characterized the region. As Bhabha describes that cultural hybridity is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures. ‘It is the moment of negotiation, the moment of resistance’ (Rutherford 1990, 211).

‘I know the madhouse is in Lahore but where is Lahore? In India or in Pakistan? ...He’s made a separate nation for Muslims called Pakistan.’

(*Toba Tek Singh* 34:34/35:10)

The act of dividing India and Pakistan along religious lines marked the colonial legacy of fixity, a concept Bhabha describes as central to colonial discourse which ‘connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy, and daemonic repetition’ (1994, 66). According to Carton (2012), identities in the Indian subcontinent were defined by hybridity—overlapping religious, linguistic, and cultural practices, including ‘**mixed-race identity in early colonial India**’, that fostered coexistence. However, the colonial division demanded rigid categorization based on religion, transforming cultural hybridity into sectarian binaries. As Bhabha notes, ‘hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities’ (1994, 113). This dual nature of hybridity—both a product of colonial power and a challenge to it—manifests in the absurdity of the speaker’s confusion about Lahore’s identity. The city,

once a symbol of shared culture, becomes a contested space, torn between newly constructed national identities. The film critiques this fixation on rigid identities through the fictitious characters of *Toba Tek Singh* whose hybridity resists the colonial authority's artificial divisions. As Nasser notes, while Partition sought to impose clear national and religious boundaries as a means of 'identity formation' (2019, 145); it inadvertently exposed the persistence of hybridity, as shared memories, cultural practices, and individual identities resisted complete division. As Bhabha asserts, 'hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal... [to] estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition' (1994, 112).

'This girl was found in the station's waiting room. In this condition. She is in a state of shock. But is she a Hindu, Sikh or a Muslim? She is just a girl.'
(Mehta 2018, 40:13/40:24).

The colonial reduction of individuals to religious labels not only disrupted hybrid identities but also rendered women particularly vulnerable to violence and othering. Women, during and after Partition, became symbolic battlegrounds for communal honor (Menon 2006, 30), and were objectified as emblems of religious and national identity. As Rutherford observes, 'the danger signified by all sexualized women is bypassed not only by her 'otherness'...' (1990, 199). Women were subjected to violence not merely as individuals but as representations of the 'other' community, reinforcing colonial binaries of division. The girl's condition in the story and the question of her religious affiliation highlights how women as 'others,' were exploited to perpetuate divisions and justify acts of communal violence. The Christian nun saying in the film, *she is just a girl*, resists this colonial logic of binary categorization by refusing to define her through rigid religious or national identities. As Bhabha says, 'identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product—it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality' (1994, 51). Partition's attempt to impose fixed religious and national identities reduced individuals to instruments of division, yet the girl's presence transcends these artificial boundaries, symbolizing the hybridity that persisted despite efforts to enforce separation.

4.2. Geographical Identity and Fluid Belonging in *Toba Tek Singh*

Toba Tek Singh challenges the notion of fixed geographical identities by portraying the fluidity of belonging in the face of colonial-imposed binaries.

'The partition of the Nation has created a rift in the hearts too.'
(Mehta 2018, 30:24)

The moment of partition is a moment of splitting, a moment of division, a moment of dislocation (Mishra 1996, cited in George 2007, 140; Zamindar 2007, cited in Raychaudhuri 2019, 41), the act of Partition was not merely about drawing lines on a map but also about imposing rigid geographical identities that disrupted previously fluid, hybrid selves. According to Bose and Jalal (2022), before Partition, identities in the Indian

subcontinent were fluid, shaped by shared cultural, religious and historical experiences. India had long maintained a cosmopolitan spirit, fostering a harmonious coexistence of diverse identities, including linguistic, regional, religious and cultural affiliations (101-158). However, the colonial imposition of geographical borders sought to fix identity within rigid, as Siddique (2020) said, binary constructs of ‘nationhood’ (220). This artificial categorization exemplifies what Bhabha terms dissemination: the process of cultural diaspora, the scattering of people across geographical and cultural boundaries (1990, 291). The scattering of communities, as seen in *Toba Tek Singh*, illustrates how geographical borders could not anchor a sense of belonging or identity, exposing their artificial and violent nature. As Martin Heidegger observes, the border marks the threshold where something begins to manifest and make its presence known (1971, cited in *Bhabha 1994*, 1), reflecting the instability and displacement imposed by Partition. Borders, rather than defining fixed identities as the colonizers intended to do, instead resist colonial impositions, becoming contested spaces where fragmented identities persist and multiply, undermining the rigid categorizations imposed by colonial powers. This is evident in the character Bishan Singh’s inability to locate himself within the newly drawn borders, symbolizing the futility of trying to confine identity to territorial boundaries.

‘I’m the Great Leader Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Now all things will function as per my wish. If you’re Mohammad Ali Jinnah then I’m master Tara Singh. Now what do you say? Long Live Pakistan! Long Live India! Down with India! Down with Pakistan!’

(Mehta 2018, 36:51/37:10)

This exaggerated mimicry of political leaders such as Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Master Tara Singh reveals the performative and fractured nature of identities imposed by colonial borders. These declarations simultaneously affirm and reject national allegiances highlighting the paradoxical and unstable construction of identity under the pressure of political division. As Bhabha observes, ‘identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product—it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality’ (1994, 51). In the context of Partition, individuals were coerced into adopting static identities tied to geographical and political divisions, erasing the hybridity that had previously defined their sense of belonging. The asylum inmates’ mimicry resists the imposed binaries of nationality and religion, creating what Bhabha refers to as the ‘Third Space,’ a space where ‘the cutting edge of translation and negotiation’ allows for a hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy (1994, 38). This space enables fragmented identities to resist the colonial legacy of fixed belonging and imagine a renewed form of fluid identity. The story of *Toba Tek Singh* highlights the need to move beyond the colonial imposition of fixed identities and rediscover the fluid belonging that once existed. Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence and the Third Space offers a critical

framework for reconfiguring fragmented identities and resisting dominant discourses. As Bhabha says, 'postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of 'minorities' within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South' (1994, 171). The Third Space, as a site of resistance, enables marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives and forge new identities, disrupting fixed notions of culture, history, and race. This ambivalence is a hallmark of the Third Space, where cultural, historical, and racial differences intersect and collide. By occupying this liminal zone, postcolonial subjects can subvert dominant discourses and create alternative narratives that reflect their complex, fragmented experiences.

'Where is Toba Tek Singh? It is where it was! In Pakistan or India? India. No...I think it's in Pakistan. Up there the rumble, the spectacle of the nonsense...government of Pakistan and India may you burn in hell.'

(Mehta 2018, 52:20/52:45)

It broke traditional relationships between people and spaces, requiring them to adapt to new irrational political divisions of lands they used to inhabit. *Toba Tek Singh* before the Partition was not bound by any narrow national or political definition (Jumani and Seelro 2023, 237). These geographical regions served as common areas of belonging where, rather than rigid geopolitical divisions, a sense of belonging was flexible and influenced by lived experience and cultural memory. Confused about the exact location of *Toba Tek Singh*, Bishan Singh symbolically and quite tragically embodies the state of trauma due to displacement as the firm coordinates of the world are disturbed by colonial map making. It only emphasizes the fact that this partitioning of land and lives that forcibly outlined geography as physical spaces were to adhere to the nation-state constructions was born out of coloniality. Bishan Singh's confusion depicts how such geographic reorientation displaces communal and dynamic sense of place to a more fixed, barricaded possessions. Bhabha characterizes the Third Space as 'a contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation' (1994, 36), wherein strictly defined boundaries are dismantled to make way for the creation of relational and hybrid meanings. Hamid Miyan's insistence that *Toba Tek Singh is where it was* can be read as a refusal to accept the artificial reconfiguration of his homeland, suggesting the possibility of reclaiming a fluid, pre-Partition sense of place through hybrid and relational identities. Bhabha's notion that 'displacement is not a pure negation but rather marks the productivity of meanings that cannot be confined within the boundaries of pre-given cultural or political traditions' (1994, 174). Bishan Singh's disorientation invites a reimagining of geographic identity within the Third Space where fluidity and hybridity can resist the divisive impacts of Partition and restore connections to a shared, pre-Partition geography.

4.3. Unity and Shared Heritage

In this sense, *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee*'s film story promotes unity and shared heritage among diverse communities by presenting narratives where differences are not erased but harmonized within the *Third Space*.

‘Just stop the car brother. Come on Mr. Sandhu, how can I stay with a Pakistani? ...I mean someone from East Punjab (India), not West Punjab (Pakistan). Keep in mind, brother, this is England. People from both India and Pakistan live together here.’

(Mehta 2018, 22:04/22:29)

A prime example of the ingrained animosity resulting from British-imposed national divisions is Sarbjit, a Sikh passenger, who becomes uncomfortable when he learns that the cab driver Ali is Pakistani. This response is an indication of the established division brought forth by colonialism's deliberate fragmentation, as described by Farooqui as a ‘colonial divide and rule strategy’ (2015, 49). However, Mr. Sandhu's response relates to the Third Space or the diasporic homeland elimination of such binarisms such as India and Pakistan or East and West Punjab. In this space, people could get together and meet each other recognizing that they have the same culture but all are divided by someone else's decisions. The Third Space as defined by Bhabha, highlights how cultural identity is essentially hybrid and develops by interaction and negotiation. The borderline activity of culture, he contends, requires an experience of ‘newness’ that is not a part of the past-present continuum. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation (1994, 7). The scene also encapsulates the ambivalence and negotiation inherent in hybrid identities. The Sikh passenger's initial prejudice reflects the scars of Partition while Mr. Sandhu's response introduces the possibility of reconciliation. As Bhabha asserts that the very act of enunciation ... is both a ‘performance’ of culture and the representation of difference that is fundamental to making meaning (1994, 36). In this sense, the scene promotes unity and shared heritage by presenting a narrative that does not erase cultural differences but harmonizes them within the Third Space.

‘Imagine if Pakistan and India were unified as one country, and Virat and Babar played together on the same team. We would be unbeatable. One team. We're one... India-Pakistan is one.’

([Thaper](#) and [Zaman](#) 2024, 1:01:03/1:01:16)

This statement envisions a return to the pre-Partition era when India and Pakistan were a single entity and imagines the collective strength that could be achieved through unity. By invoking the idea of a unified India and Pakistan, Meher critiques the colonial legacy of divide and rule which fractured a shared cultural identity into rigid national binaries. This division was a deliberate strategy to maintain control as a unified India and Pakistan would have been a formidable force. The fact, ‘the precise causes of this division are many and various’ (Raychaudhuri 2019, 3), highlights the intricacy of this division.

Bhabha's Third Space notion which emphasizes that identity is not fixed or distinct but rather negotiated at a dynamic junction where cultural differences are balanced and hybrid identities arise, is in line with this vision. 'The 'beyond' is neither a new horizon nor a leaving behind of the past', according to Bhabha (1994, 1). This intersection is reflected in the speaker's vision of a team that is united which suggests that national borders are not destinations but rather places to start when rebuilding shared cultural heritage. By imagining players from Pakistan and India on the same team, the speaker questions the colonial past that fueled hate and division. This hypothetical unity overturns the dichotomies of 'us' and 'them,' showing how deeply ingrained divisions can be overcome by means of common interests and social norms.

'...Within a huge filled closet, I discovered a precious gift of love. Come on brother, have special tea from my village...'

(Thaper and Zaman 2024, 29:57/30:05)

The huge filled closet symbolizes the colonial heritage which as the event of 1947 signifies the transition of love into hate and respect into violence. Daiya points out that the partition of India in 1947 led to a massive change of ethnic riots and violence which virtually dismantled the peaceful coexistence between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims (2008, 5). But, a priceless portrait of love found in this closet is evidence that lost harmony and unity in the post-partition world can be regained. Offering tea turns into a meaningful cultural exchange that emphasizes respect for one another and common customs. This gesture challenges divided narratives by symbolically representing the many cultural practices and everyday events that unite people. It means that it is identity which is in constant and dynamic process of becoming in the Third Space, which is a middle ground where different cultures, histories and traditions meet. The 'inter'—the frontier of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—is what bears the weight of the meaning of culture, writes Bhabha (1994, 38). Here, therefore, the brief interaction between Sabi and Ali which might be read within a politics of identification, produces a zone of contact in which differences are not negated but reconciled; a passage to a new coexistence narrative. In other words, rather than seeking to erase differences or idealize the future, there is in this scene an affirmation of mixed ethnic roots and sometimes dubious cultural heritage as the route to an undisputedly better future.

4.4. Portrayal of Communal Harmony in *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee*

Jee Ve Sohneya Jee encourages interfaith relationships and displays incorporation of cultural practices of India-Pakistan, thus establishing the Third Space in representation against which colonial power has sought to confine communities.

'...but there was a reason I lied to you... I would've never had a problem with you being a Pakistan or Muslim but...'

(Thaper and Zaman 2024, 1:41:03/1:43:27)

Meher's assertion counters the legislative binaries of identity that the film critiques in a more general sense of colonialist ideologies that sought to sever society along religious and nationalistic lines. The lie that Ali told initially also shows the fear of rejection on basis of national and religious identity which was caused by colonial politics. Meher's response challenges the prevailing narrative by opposing the fabricated distinctions between India and Pakistan, which are, as Daiya wisely notes, only the result of an 'artificial barrier' separating the two countries (2008, 91). This act of acceptance shows that it is possible to go above divisive myths by transforming their relationship into a symbol of solidarity and common humanity. Meher's proclamation, which is based on acceptance, advances the idea of harmony in which common heritage and experiences take over conflicting ideologies. The idea of Meher's acceptance is the middle ground where one cannot call the territories completely settled by either side: Pakistani and Indian, Muslim and Hindu. The transformative potential of empathy in navigating complex cultural identities is highlighted by Meher's remarks. As Bhabha notes, 'the stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference of culture' (1994, 4). In this sense, the liminal space becomes a site of cultural negotiation, where differences are constructed and negotiated through symbolic interaction. Furthermore, the importance of acknowledging and valuing cultural differences is highlighted by Bhabha's assertion that 'cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of Self to Other' (1994, 35). This understanding emphasizes the complexity and multiplicity of cultural identities, suggesting that social harmony can be achieved by embracing and celebrating these differences.

'...So, what if she is Indian? They are no different from us...'

([Thaper](#) and [Zaman](#) 2024, 1:51:46/1:51:48)

Ali's mother's acceptance of Meher as *no different* is a rejection of colonial ideologies that sought to entrench divisions between Indians and Pakistanis. By embracing Meher, the dialogue engages with Bhabha's assertion that 'hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects' (1994, 112). It redefines identity not as static or essentialist but as a fluid and negotiated process rooted in shared humanity and cultural interconnection. Bhabha suggests that a form of public rhetoric is needed, one that fosters negotiation rather than rigid adherence to predefined principles. As Mill argues, 'the problem of finding a form of public rhetoric able to represent different and opposing political 'contents'...as a dialogical discursive exchange; a negotiation of terms in the on-going present of the enunciation of the political statement' (1972, quoted in Bhabha 1994, 23). This is exemplified in Ali's mother's statement which embodies a dialogical discursive exchange, negotiating terms in the ongoing present of enunciation. The colonial legacy of division

separated Indians and Pakistanis but Ali's mother's words signify a quest to reclaim lost harmony. Her rejection of entrenched binaries and embracing of cultural negotiation as an active, ongoing process reflect the Third Space where differences are harmonized and hybrid identities emerge.

‘But will it be a Sikh marriage or Muslim marriage? Both... what if I take the wedding procession to the Wagah border?... I’m sure there will come a day when wedding processions will cross the border for weddings... India and Pakistan will come together at the border.’

([Thaper](#) and [Zaman](#) 2024, 1:58:03/1:59:11)

The conversation between Sarbjit, an Indian Sikh and Ali, a Pakistani Muslim reflects their quest for the lost harmony of the pre-Partition era where their ancestors were united and together (Roy 2010, 39). The Third Space functions as a dynamic realm where cultural and national differences blend resulting in a shared enriched identity. Bhabha explains that the beyond is neither about abandoning the past nor about arriving at a fixed future but involves a continual reinterpretation and reshaping of cultural expressions (1994, 1). So, imagining wedding processions crossing the Wagah border disrupts the entrenched dualities inherited from colonial legacies, such as us versus them or Indian versus Pakistani. These binaries have historically fueled divisions and hostility. Bhabha emphasizes that cultures cannot be reduced to *singular, fixed* identities or binary oppositions as they are inherently diverse and interconnected (1994, 52). The depiction of cross-border weddings suggests a progressive vision where communities connect through shared humanity rejecting the divisive politics of polarity. Cultural boundaries, in Bhabha’s opinion, are not inflexible but rather can be reframed as areas of innovative difference and negotiation. He writes those cultural interactions occur where meanings intersect and leading to new meanings and mutual understanding (1994, 7). This conversation illustrates how cultural differences can be embraced as assets rather than causes of conflict, potentially resolving established rivalries. According to Bhabha, it is possible for differences to live side by side in a harmonious way: far from impeding cultural insights, such differences can enhance them (1994, 177). As Bhabha also notes, ‘to live in the beyond is to live as part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity’ (1994, 7). The evocative conversation between Sabi and Ali reflects their imagination of a quest for reunion, a longing for reconciliation and a lost harmony. In this dialogue, reunite signifies a return to a past unity, a desire to rekindle the bond that once existed between Indians and Pakistanis, echoing the sentiment expressed by Hamdani and Maini, who lament that the vision of peace and harmony between the two nations was lost, yet hold onto the hope that one day, Pakistan and India can rediscover that lost vision (2022, 1-4).

5. Conclusion

From a postcolonial and cultural perspective, Punjabi cinema functions as a space that resists colonial narratives and reconstructs a shared Indo-Pakistani identity that was fractured by Partition. Instead of reinforcing imposed divisions, these films challenge the artificial constructs of partition by portraying the resilience of cultural hybridity. Schiwy asserts that ‘binaries imposed by colonial ideology,’ serve to maintain hierarchies of power and suppress histories of coexistence (2007, 271). Punjabi films like *Toba Tek Singh* and *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* disrupt these binaries, emphasizing that colonial borders cannot erase deep-rooted communal bonds, nor can they suppress the shared cultural memory that continues to transcend geopolitical divisions. *Toba Tek Singh* critiques the colonial strategy of divide and rule, demonstrating how imposed national and religious classifications turned Partition into a ‘model of violent conflict resolution,’ that fueled communal divisions, as noted by Ahmed (2002, 9). These rigid identities fractured the region’s pluralistic cultural fabric, leading to enduring cycles of displacement and mistrust. The film’s depiction of institutionalized fragmentation highlights the ‘epistemic violence’ inflicted by colonial discourse, which, as Spivak (1999) argues, silences the subaltern and erases histories that do not align with dominant nationalist ideologies, thereby maintaining the power and privilege of the dominant group by controlling the narrative. (102).

In contrast, *Jee Ve Sohneya Jee* envisions a post-Partition world where cultural heritage transcends artificial boundaries, fostering reconciliation between India and Pakistan’s borders, which must be reimagined as a *fold of peace* rather than a site of hostility. By portraying its characters’ aspirations for cross-border unity, the film embodies Bhabha’s concept of the Third Space, where identities are fluid, and historical narratives are renegotiated to encourage mutual understanding. This interstitial space, as Bhabha argues, enables the articulation of identities beyond rigid colonial classifications, challenging the binary logic of division and fostering new possibilities for cultural exchange (1994, 2). Punjabi cinema, in this context, serves as a liminal site of resistance against colonial narratives, reclaiming historical hybridity and offering an alternative discourse that subverts imposed national and religious fixities. On the one hand, the films expose the trauma and fragmentation engendered by colonialism; on the other hand, they reimagine a future rooted in shared heritage and reconciliation. In doing so, they assert the transformative potential of cinema as a tool for historical revisionism and cultural solidarity. By humanizing the experiences of individuals and communities affected by Partition, this paper highlights the necessity of revisiting the past to cultivate a more inclusive and harmonious future.

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