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Cinema as Postcolonial Archive: Indo-Pak, British, and African American Narratives Rewriting History through Visual Storytelling

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ABSTRACT
Cinema functions not only as entertainment but as a historical archive that preserves and reinterprets colonial and postcolonial memory. This article examines how Indian-Pakistani, British, and African American filmmakers use film to rewrite historical narratives marginalized by official archives. Drawing on postcolonial theory and media studies, it argues that these cinemas "stage" alternative histories: South Asian filmmakers reconfigure colonial and Partition legacies, British (especially diasporic British) filmmakers confront imperial memory, and African American filmmakers recover narratives of slavery and segregation. Through a literature review and comparative analysis of key films and archives (e.g., period films like Kartar Singh and Khamosh Pani, British-Indian Viceroy's House, and Black "race films"), the study shows how visual storytelling becomes a form of counter-history. Notable findings include that South Asian cinema often merges colonial and local hierarchies into new postcolonial formations, that film archives (like the Separate Cinema Archive) actively preserve Black history beyond traditional media, and that all these filmic practices contribute to a "sincere pursuit of a sensitive and humane" historical understandingsahapedia.org. The conclusion underscores cinema's unique ability to open "a new language" of memory, enabling communities to reclaim and re-narrate their pasts.

Keywords: *Cinema, Postcolonial Archive, Indo-Pak, British, African American Narratives, Rewriting History, Visual Storytelling.*

Introduction

Postcolonial societies often find official histories written by former colonial powers or ruling elites. Cinema, however, offers an alternative archive: films capture everyday life, personal memories, and unsanctioned voices that traditional archives overlook. Scholars note that "films provide a cinematic history that complements and sometimes challenges conventional historical records". In this sense, movies become critical sources for *rewriting* history. This article explores three intertwined cinemas, Indian and Pakistani (hereafter Indo-Pak), British (including diasporic British), and African American, as postcolonial archives. Each uses visual narrative to contest dominant histories shaped by colonialism, race, and empire.

- Indo-Pak Cinema: Indian and Pakistani film industries have produced many historical dramas that recast British colonial rule and the trauma of Partition from local perspectives. For example, films like *Kartar Singh* (1960, Pakistan) and *Partition* (2007,

India) foreground human suffering and cross-cultural relations, rather than merely nationalist tropessahapedia.orgsahapedia.org.

- British Cinema (diasporic memory): In Britain, filmmakers of former-colonial backgrounds or sensibilities (e.g. Isaac Julien) use film to interrogate empire's legacy. As Liliana Ellena observes, telling postcolonial stories "requires a new language" to break with imperial narratives. Contemporary British films about Empire (e.g. *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, *Viceroy's House*) and Black British documentaries highlight suppressed histories.
- African American Cinema: Black American filmmakers have long created works (from the early "race films" to modern dramas) that recover African American experiences under slavery and segregation. Archives like the Separate Cinema Archive preserve posters and memorabilia, illustrating how Black stories "offer a thorough historical context" and challenge mainstream erasures. Films from *Birth of a Nation* (1915) to *12 Years a Slave* (2013) reflect and reshape collective memory of racial injustice.

This paper reviews relevant literature on film as archive and memory, then analyzes representative films and archives in each category. It argues that cinema's visual storytelling operates as a counter-archive, enabling postcolonial societies to rewrite history on their own terms.

Literature Review

Scholars have increasingly recognized cinema's archival potential. As Sheed Isheal notes, beyond entertainment, cinema "preserve[s] cultural, social, and political realities over time," shaping collective memory by complementing traditional archives. In postcolonial theory, films are understood as sites of memory and resistance. Postcolonial literature and film theorists (e.g. Edward Said, Homi Bhabha) stress how colonized peoples create counter-narratives to subvert imperial discourses. Esha Niyogi De observes that South Asia's cinemas "have become staging grounds for post colonialism, with colonial and local hierarchies merged into new imperial formations". This reflects the idea that filmmakers "write back" against colonial historiography through allegory and myth.

Key themes in the literature include:

- Archive and Memory: Research shows film preserves intangible heritage. Content analyses of films and newsreels demonstrate that cinema captures "lived experiences and societal transformations" unavailable in text archives. Yet scholars also debate cinema's reliability as history, noting its narrative biases. Nonetheless, film archives (national and private) are now valued by historians. For example, the Separate Cinema Archive (dedicated to Black film memorabilia) exemplifies how visual ephemera chronicle African American contributions that official media often ignored.
- Postcolonial Film Theory: Although postcolonial theory originated in literature, it has been applied to cinema. Critics discuss how films depicting colonial encounters (from Hollywood Westerns to British epics) reinforced imperial ideology, while postcolonial filmmakers seek to invert those portrayals. The concept of "counter-memory" is relevant: documentary and feature films can recover subaltern voices, filling gaps in the colonial record. For instance, research on South Asian cinema notes an emerging trend to represent Partition through "shared sufferings and emotions" rather than patriotic mythsahapedia.orgsahapedia.org. Feminist and diaspora studies also highlight how marginalized groups (women, diaspora) use film to assert agency.

- Visual Storytelling as Resistance: Film festivals, retrospectives, and archives have begun to reclaim neglected cinematic histories. Archival film usage (e.g. found footage documentaries) is identified as a form of decolonizing memory. Scholars like Liliana Ellena argue that re-telling colonial history requires not only new content but "a new language" of representation. This linguistic shift means characters and narratives depart from earlier tropes (e.g. inverting roles of colonizer/colonized).

In sum, the literature underscores that cinema functions as a secondary archive, not an official record, but a parallel historical narrative. It can validate oral histories, showcase everyday life, and reveal the meanings people attach to historical events. This review informs the subsequent analysis of three cinemas, each embodying a postcolonial archive in practice.

Analysis

Indo-Pak Cinema: Narrating Colonialism and Partition

In India and Pakistan, cinema has played a crucial role in processing the colonial legacy and the trauma of 1947 Partition. Early on, filmmakers rarely tackled these issues head-on; narratives were often dominated by nationalist sentiment. As Huma Sadaf reports, only a "meagre" handful (≈45) of films addressed Partition for decades, mostly under "a heavy shadow of patriotism"sahapedia.org. This emphasis on national pride meant the human dimension of partition, the ordinary people's grief and displacement, was largely ignored. For example, many 1950s–70s films used stereotypes and "blame the other" tropes, avoiding uncomfortable truths of communal violencesahapedia.org.

Gradually, this changed. A new generation of South Asian filmmakers began to re-write the narrative through sensitive historical dramas. Mehreen Jabbar (Pakistan) notes that until recently, films "reflect[ed] the government of the day" and kept audiences "stuck in [one] vision" of Partitionsahapedia.org. Breaking with this, late-20th-century movies have foregrounded shared suffering. Notable Pakistani films like *Kartar Singh* (1959) and *Khamosh Pani* (2003) deliberately depict Hindu-Muslim-Sikh camaraderie and the chaos of riotssahapedia.orgsahapedia.org. Indian films like *Earth* (1998) and *Partition* (2007) similarly highlight personal stories amid historical upheaval. These films became counter-archives, preserving narratives that official textbooks omit.

Further, Indo-Pak cinema often merges colonial history with contemporary identity. Esha Niyogi De's concept of "transborder cinema" is illuminating: she shows how the South Asian film industry uses colonial tropes (law-and-order, romance, family honor) to reveal postcolonial power structures. For instance, dramas about pre-independence rebellion (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, 2002) or independence politics (*Gandhi*, 1982, British/Indian co-production) recast national heroes on local terms. They respond to "Occidentalism" by depicting Western colonizers as antagonists (and sometimes flawed allies), and by reframing freedom fighters' stories for modern audiences. In qualitative analyses, Mustafa and Riaz find that Indian films tend to frame anti-colonial struggle as secular-nationalist, whereas Pakistani films inflect it with religious identity, a difference that reflects each nation's historiography after 1947.

By retelling colonial and Partition histories, these films create an *indigenous archive*. They incorporate oral traditions and local memories into visual form. Newer films use first-person narration, letters, and personal photographs to ground historical events in individual lives. Moreover, documentaries and short-film anthologies (e.g. Sharmeen Obaid's *Home 1947*) explicitly archive witness testimony, acknowledging that cinema must capture "what [official

archives] could not". In this way, Indo-Pak cinema is actively rewriting history – preserving the subaltern view of colonialism for future generations.

British Cinema: Empire, Memory, and Diaspora

British cinema occupies a dual position in this archive: as the former colonizer's cultural product and as a site where diaspora and postcolonial perspectives emerge. Classic British films often romanticized empire (e.g. *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Zulu*), effectively serving the colonial archive. But recent British (and British-Indian) filmmakers have begun interrogating that past. Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House* (2017) dramatized Partition from the Viceroy's vantage, yet also included Indian and Pakistani leaders' perspectives. British television series (*The Crown*) and films increasingly acknowledge colonial history as a backdrop, encouraging audiences to question the narrative of benevolent empire.

Crucially, Black and Asian British filmmakers use cinema to challenge imperial narratives. The Black British film collective of the 1980s (e.g. Isaac Julien's *Territories*, 1984) explicitly employed found footage and archives to critique racialized histories. As Ellena notes, filmmakers like Julien sought "a new language" to unfold histories that mainstream culture obscured. Contemporary British documentaries (e.g. Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* series) dramatize real events of racial injustice in London, rewriting the narrative of Britain as a tolerant society. These works do not recount colonial conquest directly, but they inherit its legacy: the internal "othering" and police violence in cities.

This diasporic angle makes British cinema part of the postcolonial archive. Immigrant and minority filmmakers often portray memories of homeland oppression (e.g. Bangladeshi-origin director Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*, or African-British films about Caribbean settlers). Such stories preserve immigrant community histories that Britain's national archive neglects. For example, *Brick Lane* (2007) and *East Is East* (1999) dramatize British-Pakistani family experiences with colonial echoes of racial discrimination. In *Neglect of Empire Studies in British Film*, critics urge that postcolonial Britain must "write back" to empire by centering colonized voices; British cinema, increasingly, fills this role.

Though fewer blockbuster British films explicitly depict empire, British film institutions do preserve colonial-era footage. For instance, archives like the British Film Institute house documentaries and newsreels from the Empire, but also film collections of colonial subjects. These are now being digitized and re-examined. The existence of archives like June Givanni's PanAfrican Film Archive and the Nicholas Rashad Archive (immigrants' home movies) demonstrate Britain's recognition that cinema is an archive of empire's legacy. By revisiting old film, curators reveal how past media constructed imperial narratives, enabling modern viewers to deconstruct them.

African American Cinema: Reclaiming Histories of Slavery and Segregation

African American filmmakers have long used cinema to reclaim and reframe history. From early 20th-century "race films" by Oscar Micheaux to modern Hollywood productions, these works archive Black experiences outside whitewashed accounts. The Separate Cinema Archive, for example, "chronicles African American film imagery and the American legacy of exporting Blackness through art". It collects posters and ephemera (see Figure 1) that otherwise might be lost. By preserving this material culture, the archive itself is a visual record of how Black stories were told, sold, and stereotyped – a resource for rewriting film history.

Early "race films" like Dainah la Métisse (1927) are emblematic of African American cinematic heritage. Such films, directed by or starring Black artists, preserved stories of Black life and resistance that mainstream archives ignored.

During Jim Crow, Black filmmakers created an independent cinema that served segregated communities. Figures like Oscar Micheaux made dozens of films depicting racism, lynching, and the Great Migration – topics the major studios avoided. Though many of these films were lost, their legacy survives in secondary archives and remembrances. In the late 20th century, directors like Spike Lee (*Do the Right Thing*, *Malcolm X*) and Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*) actively rewrite historical narratives. They highlight internal community struggles and stories of Black heroes long neglected (e.g. Nat Turner, Marcus Garvey). Such films stand against Hollywood's erasures.

The 1954 film Carmen Jones (starring Dorothy Dandridge) reimagined Bizet's opera with an all-Black cast. It illustrates how Black filmmakers and artists transformed European narratives into their own cultural context, effectively creating a new historical memory.

The PBS-artbound feature on the Separate Cinema Archive emphasizes that marketing materials (posters, trailers) "offer a thorough historical context of how Black stories and Black bodies were consumed and commodified". This insight underlines cinema's double role: films entertain, but they also record and broadcast racial attitudes of their times. By curating these materials, scholars and activists are building an archive that informs current narratives. Contemporary African American cinema, including independent and documentary films, often explicitly references history. For example, Ava DuVernay's *Selma* (2014) and Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) reconstruct Civil Rights struggles. They draw on letters, speeches, and news footage to make the past vivid. In doing so, they validate African American oral and written archives.

Importantly, African American cinema does not limit itself to American topics. It engages global postcolonial themes by showing the African diaspora's links to colonialism. For instance, films about Afro-Caribbean settlers in the UK (like Horace Ové's *Pressure*, 1975) connect Black American and British colonial legacies. The concept of "Black Atlantic" (Paul Gilroy) resonates here: African American film is part of a larger network of resisting imperial narratives. Film festivals (e.g. AFFRM) and archives (e.g. UCLA's Black Film Archive) now catalog these histories systematically. The effect is that African American cinema, collectively, functions as a decentralized postcolonial archive – housing episodes of history from slavery to hip-hop, often in more authentic voices than textbooks.

Conclusion

Across India-Pakistan, Britain, and the United States, cinema has emerged as a potent postcolonial archive – a visual memory bank that rewrites histories shaped by empire. The analysis shows that filmmakers in these traditions consciously reclaim and reinterpret the past. Indo-Pak cinema, long neglecting Partition, now produces sensitive, multi-perspective dramas that center human stories rather than propagandasahapedia.orgsahapedia.org. British (and diaspora) cinema is beginning to dismantle colonial myths by telling untold stories of migration and racial injustice. African American filmmakers have, for over a century, maintained their own cinematic archive (the "race film" tradition and beyond) that corrects mainstream Hollywood's omissions.

A key insight is that creating these archives requires creativity: as Liliana Ellena writes, "to begin a story does not simply entail the disclosure of something untold but requires a new language".

Indeed, postcolonial filmmakers develop novel narrative forms – nonlinear histories, hybrid genres, and symbol-laden imagery – to convey experiences erased by official accounts. Each film cited here contributes to a collective rewriting: it acknowledges whose voice has been silenced and strives to give it shape.

The implications are significant. By treating cinema as a historical archive, scholars and audiences gain access to plural memories. Visual storytelling can thus supplement textual archives, offering insights into cultural identity, trauma, and resistance. The case studies suggest that film archives should be preserved and studied with equal rigor as libraries of books. Ultimately, as these cinemas continue evolving, they promise ever more nuanced articulations of postcolonial identity and history ensuring that the past remains alive in collective consciousness, even as it is continuously rewritten for the present.

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