TELEVISING THE PARTITION OF BRITISH INDIA
Memory, Identity and the Privatisation of the Past in 70th Anniversary Commemorative Broadcasting

Clelia Clini, Jasmine Hornabrook and Emily Keightley

2017 marked the 70th anniversary of the end of colonial rule in British India and of the division of the country into the two independent states of India and Pakistan. To commemorate the event, in August 2017, the BBC broadcast a series of programmes focused specifically on Partition. Focusing on My Family, Partition and Me: India 1947, this article analyses the programme’s structure and rhetorical strategies, with particular reference to its representation of the empire and of contemporary postcolonial Britain. We argue that the show, by merging personal and national histories, successfully promotes an inclusive perspective on Britishness, in line with the BBC’s inclusivity remit, which also emphasises the multicultural character of Britain as a result of its colonial history. The emphasis on individualised account of suffering and resilience, however, leaves Partition circumscribed within the ‘temporary madness’ narrative, thus limiting the show’s engagement with the politics of colonialism and decolonisation.

KEYWORDS Partition; empire; memory; emotions; BBC; public service broadcasting

Introduction

2017 marked the 70th anniversary of the end of colonial rule in British India. The process of independence was a cause for celebration in the subcontinent, but was stained by the violence that accompanied the division of the country into the new states of India and Pakistan. The scale of this communal violence was unprecedented in the country: unofficial estimates place deaths between 200,000 and two million, 75,000 women abducted and raped, and nearly fifteen million people uprooted. Partition therefore represents one of the most traumatic events in South Asian history and its legacy persists in South Asia today. The legacy of Partition is also still felt in Britain, which was not only the ruling power on the subcontinent when the Partition plan was devised, but became a destination for many people of South Asian heritage, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. At the time of Partition, India was also home to many white British people, and yet in Britain, as in South Asia, Partition has been largely placed at the margins of national history.
For the 70th anniversary of Partition the BBC produced a season of programmes titled *Seventy Years On: Partition Stories*, which aimed to uncover ‘the hidden history of what happened in 1947 and reveal the legacy Partition leaves us with today’. The season comprised a variety of news, radio and TV shows, offering viewers a perspective on Partition from the point of view of ordinary people who had been personally affected, or whose families had been personally affected, by the events. Programmes exploring Partition through the stories of survivors and/or their families included: *My Family, Partition and Me* (two episodes), *Dangerous Borders* (three episodes), *India’s Partition: The Forgotten Story* (one episode), *Partition: Legacy of the Line* (one episode) and Newsround’s special *Finding My Family—Partition*. Other factual programmes included the documentary: *Seven Days of Summer: Countdown to Partition* and the Newsnight special: *Partition 70 Years On*, both including contributions from people whose families were caught in the violence and from scholars in South Asian Studies and History. The season included also a series of radio programmes. BBC1’s *My Family, Partition and Me: India 1947* (henceforth *MFPM*), was one of the most successful shows of the season in terms of viewer numbers and professional recognition. As a show that focused on such a significant yet marginalised moment in British history, which aired on the national public service broadcaster, *MFPM* provides an excellent case study to critically reflect on the televisual construction of British postcolonial memory. Following Edgerton’s claim that television is ‘the primary way that children and adults form their understanding of the past’, this article thus discusses the ways in which the show frames Partition, with particular reference to the meanings it constructs in relation to the imperial past and contemporary postcolonial British identities. By drawing a connection between the social and political context of production, the current trends in television history programmes and the structure of the show, we argue that *MFPM* brings about an inclusive representation of contemporary British identity, acting as a reminder that migration from South Asia is a direct consequence of colonialism. It also stresses the impossibility of disentangling British history from the history of South Asia. However, the emphasis on highly emotional individualised accounts of Partition experiences, and the equivalence of those experiences, limits the show’s engagement with the politics of colonialism and decolonisation.

**Methodology**

This research is part of a five-year project on cultural memories of Partition funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Launched in October 2017, the project explores the circulation of memories of Partition, decolonisation and migration within British Asian communities in London and Loughborough. In particular, we investigate how these memories have ‘descended’ into the everyday experiences of people of South Asian heritage in the UK, how processes of remembering (and forgetting) Partition, decolonisation and the empire inform the negotiation of British Asian identities and the (re)construction and maintenance of communities, and the role of media in the transmission of these memories. Our empirical work includes a qualitative analysis of the full sample of BBC television output on Partition in 2017 from which we draw this case study, and a four-year participant observation with different British Asian community groups, with whom we also organise focus groups and in-depth conversations around the research themes and arts-based activities.
including film screenings which act as entry points into discussions of postcolonial memory.\textsuperscript{10}

One of themes that has consistently emerged during our conversations with research participants is the question of representation and of the public engagement (or lack thereof) with Partition as part of British history. In this context, \textit{MFPM} was often mentioned as one of the few shows that openly drew a connection between the empire, Partition and migration from South Asia. One research participant, a British Asian woman in her 40s, for example told us:

I think they thought about the audience as people of different generations with South Asian heritage, but also mainly the audience of people not from South Asia. They have no idea about partition. There are English people who don’t really know about it, even my friends at work were saying … [they] knew it [India] was colonial but then [they] knew the empire was breaking up and that’s it.

The show was one of the most popular within the 2017 Partition season, with 2.72 million viewers watching its first episode on Wednesday 9th August 2017.\textsuperscript{11} Its success led to Anita Rani winning the Presenter category at the Royal Television Awards in March 2018. \textit{MFPM} thus represents a particularly valuable case study for the analysis of the re-creation of public history on television and of public engagement with Britain’s colonial past.

Our analysis combines a traditional political economic study of television production and a cultural studies approach to media. As a show broadcast by the BBC, which is central to the production of an imagined British national community,\textsuperscript{12} \textit{MFPM} needs to be framed within the social, political and economic dynamics of public service production in order to understand which representations of Partition were privileged and the specific representational politics in play within them. The first part of the article will examine the 2017 Partition season, and previous commemorations of Indian and Pakistan independence, in relation to the remit of public service broadcasting. We will then assess current trends of history-based television programmes in relation to the structure of \textit{MFPM} and its representation of Partition and the British colonial past. Even though our analysis of the \textit{MFPM} is primarily textual, comments made by research participants about the programmes are used as illustrative examples of how the show has been received amongst British South Asian viewers, while also reminding us of the multiplicity of positions that viewers can inhabit in relation to the main narrative.

\textbf{Partition at 70 in the BBC}

The 70th anniversary of the Partition of British India in 2017 was an important moment for the public representation of British Asian history and for the reimagining of Britain’s colonial past. Discussing the relationship between the representation of history on television and national identity, Gray and Bell observe that ‘commemorative programming […] seeks both to represent a historical national identity, but, in so doing, to create a sense of community within a culturally disparate nation’.\textsuperscript{13} This suggests that the BBC’s focus on Partition in 2017 can be welcomed as a sign of public acknowledgment of the British part in the tragedy that accompanied the independence of India and Pakistan,
2017 is not the first time the BBC commemorated independence in South Asia. Special television and radio programmes were broadcast during previous anniversaries but have been criticised for maintaining a neat boundary between South Asia and Britain, perpetuating the orientalist idea of South Asia as Britain’s ‘Other’. As Thussu wrote about the 1997 commemoration, ‘almost invariably much of the coverage in the media was tinged with a colonialist outlook, even after half a century. Britain can rarely see beyond that vision, given its history and its romance with the Raj’.

On the 60th anniversary of independence in 2007, the BBC launched a new season of programmes called *India and Pakistan 07*, designed to mark ‘the 60th anniversary of the independence of India and Pakistan’. Compared to 1997, this series introduced an overview of postcolonial Britain that softened the boundary between Britain and South Asia. Programmes such as *India with Sanjeev Bhaskar*, *Saira Khan’s Pakistan Adventure* and *Meera Syal’s When Aunty went East*, created around the personal links that their hosts maintain with both Britain and the subcontinent, marked a step towards a public recognition of the legacy of the empire in the making of contemporary Britain. The *India and Pakistan 07* season prepared the ground for the 2017 commemoration of Partition: if Bhaskar’s, Khan’s and Syal’s programmes confirmed the popularity of a (British Asian) personalised and celebrity-led TV format, this was maintained in 2017. Moreover, even though Partition had been tackled in specific programmes during the 1997 and 2007 commemorative seasons, it had not been fully integrated into the overall independence narrative, whereas in 2017 the focus of programming shifted from an emphasis on independence with reference to Partition, to an almost exclusive focus on Partition as a discrete historical event.

**Public Service and the (Imperial) Past**

It is important to consider the context within which the 2007 and the 2017 BBC commemorations of independence and Partition took place. Discussing televised representations of the past, Gray points out that we should treat these programmes as ‘major components of the creative industries’, as they are not just ‘free floating cultural artefacts’. In order to understand how the past is addressed and re-presented in television programmes, it is imperative to look closely at the institutions that produce them—their production values, their codes, and their remit. Two elements are of particular importance in understanding how these commemorative seasons were shaped: the 2007 and the 2017 BBC Charter renewals and the concomitant rising popularity of history programmes in mainstream British television, including ‘celebrity-based genealogy shows’.

As a public service broadcasting institution funded by a licence fee, the BBC has been independent from government control and tasked with informing, educating and entertaining the public. These remain the defining principles of the BBC. Despite significant changes which have occurred within the broadcasting environment over the years,
the BBC has maintained at its core the belief that ‘the Corporation should provide a (‘internally pluralistic’) range of high quality programmes’. While what constitutes ‘quality’ programmes is a contested issue, critics tend to agree on the very broad idea that these are those that ‘may have greater collective benefits than others’. This is a critical question for the BBC, as it periodically needs to demonstrate its value to British public life and make a case for the renewal of its Charter every ten years.

The 2007 Charter renewal took place in a context of considerable pressure for the BBC. The transition to digital technology was rapidly changing the British media landscape, making it more difficult to justify a public service broadcasting system funded by a licence fee. In addition, the BBC at the time was under fire after the publication of the Hutton report (2004), which severely criticised the corporation for its coverage of the 2003 Iraq war. In light of the Charter renewal, and mounting public criticism, the BBC published a document titled Building Public Value in 2004, which highlighted the corporation’s ‘vision for its own future’ and was, according to Collins, its unofficial ‘manifesto for Charter Renewal’. Collins commented that the document offered ‘the most fully developed set of reflections on public value and the implementation of a public value-based regime of any public body’. The paper reiterated ‘public interest’ as the principle driver of the BBC and placed renewed emphasis on specific measures including: democratic value, cultural and creative value, educational value, social and community value and global value. This vision included the BBC’s commitment to ‘bring our shared historical and cultural heritage alive for a modern audience […] through popular programme initiatives’ and to produce programmes which will help viewers to make ‘sense of the past in order to illuminate the present’. Specific emphasis was placed on inclusivity, with a commitment ‘to build a deeper understanding of multi-faith Britain’.

Ten years later, in 2017, the Charter renewal took place at another significant moment in British political, social and cultural life, as the outcome of the EU referendum brought to the surface deep divisions in British society and questions were raised over the BBC’s ability to speak across political lines, to a range of socio-economic experience, and to diverse values. The 2016 Puttnam Report publicly expressed concerns over ‘the purpose’ of public service television at a time of ‘high levels of disengagement from traditional political parties, the collapse of the centre ground, falling levels of trust in major public institutions and a willingness to identify with social groups beyond the level of the nation state’. Moreover, consultations preceding the charter renewal revealed that ‘BAME’ communities did not feel represented by the BBC and increasingly looked for alternative, more inclusive, media sources. To address these issues, the 2017 Charter renewal strongly reiterated the case for public service broadcasting, again emphasising the BBC’s commitment to ‘bring people together for shared experiences and help contribute to the social cohesion and wellbeing of the United Kingdom’. Additionally, the corporation publicly acknowledged its shortcomings in terms of inclusion and diversity, and committed to ‘give greater focus to underserved audiences, particularly those from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds’. Once again, the 2017 Partition season reflected well the BBC’s commitments, and it is no coincidence that it was mentioned in the Inclusivity
section of the BBC’s Annual Report 2017/2018 as part of their aim to keep ‘reflecting, representing and staying truly relevant to the communities across the UK’.39

**Televising the Past**

Alongside a renewed commitment to promote social and cultural cohesion, increased popular interest in history has informed the programming around the 2017 commemoration of Partition. Since the second half of the 1990s, television had witnessed a ‘history boom’40 which is connected to its ‘ability to embody current concerns and priorities within the stories it telecasts about the past’ and its use of the past to ‘clarify the present and discover the future’.41 This is particularly pertinent to the 2017 commemoration of Partition because it took place at a time in which Britain was questioning its own identity and its position on the global stage, especially in relation to its former colonial possessions in the wake of the Brexit referendum.

The early 2000s also saw the continued intensification of celebrity culture alongside a simultaneous growing interest in the lives of ordinary people who participate in talent and/or reality shows.42 The popularity of historical programmes featuring celebrities and ordinary people led to the emergence of a new televisual genre: the ‘celebrity-based genealogy show’.43 These shows combine the exploration of the national past with more personal, family-centred stories: celebrities research their family roots and, in the process, discover the impact of historical events on the lives of their own families. Williams suggests that this ‘boom in genealogy’ is a response to an identity crisis occurring as a consequence of key social and cultural changes such as ‘the weakening of class and other forms of traditional identity’,44 which, ‘led people to search the past for explanations of whom they are and where they come from’.45 One of the most successful shows of this kind is *Who Do You Think You Are* (WDYTYA): produced by Wall to Wall Media, WDYTYA was launched in 2004 on BBC and was the ‘highest rated series on BBC2’ that year,46 soon becoming a BBC flagship programme.47 Holdsworth proposes that its appeal, apart from the successful formula of a celebrity-led format, is due to the show’s ability to draw connections between past and present, as well as between social and personal histories.48 The use of memory in the communication of history is a particularly important element because it fosters empathy and it makes history more accessible to non-specialist viewers,49 fulfilling the BBC’s remit to inform, educate and entertain. Moreover, in line with the objectives stated in the 2017 charter renewal, WDYTYA features participants of different ethnic backgrounds, offering ‘a more encompassing vision of ‘Britishness’ and a more inclusive history of Britain and British national identity’.50

**The 2017 Partition Series**

BBC1’s *My Family, Partition and Me: India 1947*, also produced by Wall to Wall Media, is modelled on a very similar format to WDYTYA. Rani herself makes the connection in the opening scenes of the first episode of the show, explaining how, upon her participation in WDYTYA, she received many messages from British viewers whose families too had been affected by Partition, and so she made it ‘her mission to explore their Partition stories’.51
In the opening episode, after a brief introduction to Partition—described as a ‘British-led plan’—Rani explains how the show follows the children and grandchildren of Partition survivors who rebuilt their lives in Britain as they go back to South Asia to discover ‘how Partition dramatically changed their family stories forever’. This introduction frames Partition as part of British national history, explicitly identifying Britain’s role in the process, and acknowledges that this event reverberates in contemporary life in Britain. The series follows the personal stories of six British people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds who journey across continents to research their family histories, in the process exploring the connections between their families and the social and political history of the three, latterly-four countries of Britain, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In line with the BBC’s inclusivity remit, the show stresses that its participants ‘come from all sides caught up in the violence: Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and British colonial’.

Following the recent trend towards the use of reality formats, MFPM explores how family histories intersect with the national past, uncovering the overlaps between private and public, personal and national. As the title suggests, the relationship between History and family history is approached as a journey of self-discovery: if, as Watson proposes, ‘humans are defined by who and where they are from’, what participants find out about their ancestors promises to enrich their understanding of who they are (Me) in the present moment. By having Anita Rani as both a presenter and a participant, the programme also capitalises on the simultaneous popularity of celebrity culture and ordinary life. In a bid to find out more about how Partition affected their own families, participants travel to the subcontinent where they visit the places and, in some cases, the houses, that their families were forced to leave because of Partition, and so they travel to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Participants are first presented in their homes, where they introduce themselves and offer some background on their family’s Partition and migration stories. This introduction is charged with emotions as participants articulate their affection for their relatives who went through Partition, while survivors—one participant and one participant’s relative—provide a first-hand account of the events which is tinged mostly with nostalgia for a lost past and with sorrow, and regret, for the horror of those days. Once they reach their destinations, participants visit their family hometowns and talk to witnesses and/or old family friends who act as local informants adding details about their relatives’ plights at the time of Partition. Following the WDYTYA format, they also meet up with historians who contribute specialist historical information about their families and social and political context within which their relatives lived.

An Emotional Journey

The four Partition stories tackled by MFPM, all narrate of the displacement of people who were forced to leave their homes to escape the violence unleashed by Partition and seek refuge in India, Pakistan, or Britain. The emotional focus of the show is heightened through its narrative structure, which combines the presenter-led mode, the commentary mode and the testimony mode. The presenter (Rani) appears at the beginning of each episode to introduce the show and at the end of the second episode to draw conclusions on the importance of learning about Partition, while also commenting on its legacy for
British citizens like herself and the other participants. She provides a voiceover commentary throughout the two episodes, and features as a participant with her mother in the second one. Rani’s narrative accompanies the journeys of participants (herself and her mother included), who are filmed as they approach their locations and interact with locals, as well as when they reflect upon their journeys. The voiceover account is a staple mode of address in history television and documentaries, and that is because, as Corner says, ‘it allows greater scope for the compilation of pictures from widely different sources, including archives’. In MFPM, Rani’s commentary is accompanied by archival footage and by family photographs, placed in context by the voiceover account, thus providing detailed descriptions and securing narrative continuity. In televised history, the presenter-led mode too is a very common strategy of addressing history, but if, traditionally, in British television the presenter is a (male) expert in the subject matter, in this particular case it is a woman who, while not an historian, has a very personal connection to the subject being investigated. If the presenter-led mode of address in television history by itself tends to give ‘preference to the personal’, then the fact that the commentary is made by the same person who the audience identifies as the presenter, and who is also known to have a private investment in the subject matter being investigated, makes the narrative even more personal. Moreover, Rani’s introductory and closing scenes, made on locations, promote a different affective quality compared to what she could have achieved in more aseptic studio scenes, as the strategy of filming in a ‘historically significant context’, according to Corner, contributes to the ‘production of a more historical feeling in the audience’. Emotions are also central to the way in which participants are portrayed, as their stories are edited so to appear unfiltered to viewers, as they talk to the camera and with the people they meet throughout their journeys seemingly without prompting and, in the style of reality TV, seemingly unaware of the camera. Cameras film them as they move into the literally foreign territory of the past, talk to people (witnesses and/or specialised historians) as well as when they reflect upon their journeys and share their thoughts on the meaning of Partition for their loved-ones and the impact it had on their own families. By offering personal narratives from both sides of the border, the programme draws a parallel between the experiences of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims, as it highlights the fact that all parties suffered violence at the hands of each other. While this is undoubtedly the case, within the narrative structure of the programme all participants occupy the status of victim, with perpetrators of violence remaining as largely unspecified ‘others’. This particular rhetorical strategy promotes a feeling of empathy, in line with popular history’s current concerns, offering viewers the possibility to draw comparisons with the experiences of their own ancestors.

Testimonies narrate tales of solidarity that undercut the brutality of Partition violence, as survivors recall episodes during which members from the ‘enemy community’ offered them shelter and helped them to flee their villages and towns. These stories of solidarity are of critical importance in narratives of Partition because they serve as a reminder of the possibility of cross-community solidarity and mutual support, while simultaneously reinforcing the dominant construction of Partition as an anomaly, ‘an illegitimate outbreak of violence’, which is in contrast with the (supposedly) harmonious inter-communal relationships which characterised Indian life until 1947. In MFPM, first-hand accounts
of Partition, as well as inherited memories of pre-independence India, subscribe to this narrative, as inter-communal relations are described predominantly as amicable before the division of the country in two. This romanticised image of inter-communal harmony before 1947 is a recurring theme in survivors’ accounts of Partition because, as Nandy observes, one of the strategies of coping with the trauma, for those who survived, was to counter the violence that characterised the period with an idealised image of life pre-1947 (especially in the village): ‘resorting to an idyllic past—he argues—may be the survivors’ way of relocating their journey through violence in a universe of memory that is less hate-filled, less buffeted by rage and dreams of revenge’.64 This way, memories shape a more acceptable version of the past and, at the same time, serve as a monitor for the present, as the process of ‘re-membering’65 a way of life characterised by inter-communal harmony in contrast with the temporary madness of Partition ‘reiterates the ethics of everyday life and multi-cultural living’.66 This was a theme often picked up by our research participants, as one of them, a British Asian woman in her thirties, commented that ‘people forget that people can’t just get out and leave a land. They need help from their neighbours. So we need stories like that, how people escaped’.

The insertion of testimony interviews with locals, both witnesses and historians, is framed as a ‘conversational encounter’,67 making the historical narratives that underpin these family stories more personal and therefore more accessible, ‘setting up more experiential and subjectively deep viewing alignments with the past’.68 The narrative’s reliance on memory also privileges emotions: as Corner notes, ‘testimony often provides a powerful watching, not just listening, experience for the viewer’, because ‘the visual and dramatic interest of a person, and particularly a face, in an act of recollection, is an important factor in the semiotics and the power of testimony’.69 The combination of personalised accounts of history and the reliance on memory is highly emotive, particularly given the nature of the memories through which participants uncover tales of violence, despair and mourning, as well as solidarity, hope and resilience. In this respect, one young research participant, a British Asian woman in her twenties, was particularly affected by the account of a survivor:

I think it’s nice because you got to see it from the actual people who lived through it. It was very emotional. I’ve actually written some stuff from those. Some guy had written a poem, and I think that that would be an interesting art caption. I’ve got it here. It says: “The days of sorrow are over, brother, Now good times are coming, New life has come into life now. Those days were painful, But they’ve gone now. Now I’m happy.”

The emotional journey is also heightened for viewers through the diverse musical scoring by Nainita Desai. Combining various configurations of piano, strings, electronics, sitar, sarod and tabla, among numerous others, the score supports the programme’s structure and mood-cueing throughout with a range of musical pieces and bolsters the construction of emotion in the personalised narratives and testimonies. During some, but not all, of the personalised, emotional accounts, a minimal score of piano and strings, in addition to instances of sarod and santoor, is used to heighten empathy and to connect, and sustain, the emotion from the testimonies and participants’ reflections to archival footage and Rani’s voiceover commentary (thereby connecting the personal to historical accounts). The use of music in televised documentaries is regarded as primarily emotional,
either by signalling appropriate levels of emotion or to provide support for an intensity of emotion that cannot be visualised or spoken.\textsuperscript{70} While the visual content and the spoken accounts are highly emotive in themselves, the minimal musical texture provides additional support to the portrayal of the painful memories being recounting through the testimonies and signals the level of emotion to viewers. In this way, the score has been put to significant use in its affective role in this Partition narrative.

**Partition, Public Service and the Empire**

In her seminal work on the televisual representations of Black and Asian images in Britain, Malik observed that:

> British television’s founding ethos of ‘public service’ is important for how it generates and circulates meanings about nationhood, community and society and for the ways in which it marks, excludes and addresses aspects of identity and difference within the construction of the imagined community of the nation.\textsuperscript{71}

*MFPM* is undoubtedly a progressive step in the representation of nationhood and of contemporary multicultural Britain insofar as it foregrounds a largely marginalised event in British Asian history while at the same time emphasising contemporary diversity in Britain as a consequence of its colonial history. In this sense, just like *WDYTYA*, the show successfully merges entertainment with (educational) historical content that, by linking ‘personal and national genealogies’, promotes a reflection on the contemporary.\textsuperscript{72} The focus on ordinary individuals and the impact of History on their families encourages a feeling of empathy that facilitates an engagement with both the individual stories of participants and History, making emotions ‘a powerful point of entry into the past’.\textsuperscript{73} Indeed, the show itself is described as a follow up to a specific episode of *WDYTYA* which triggered viewers’ interest into the history of Partition. Importantly, this affective approach to history is accompanied by specialist knowledge offered by professional historians, who offer participants and viewers alike a picture the historical context of events.\textsuperscript{74}

The structure of the programme, at the intersection of genealogy, personal memory, and national history, thus prioritises an emotional approach to Partition that relies strongly on (inherited) memories. In the context of postcolonial Britain, memories of idyllic intercommunal relations in pre-Partition India which stress the ethics of multicultural living sits well the BBC’s remit of inclusivity as it offers a positive perspective on multicultural Britain. Moreover, the inclusion of a white British national in the group, whose family had settled in India before Partition, stresses the wide-ranging impact of Partition on contemporary Britain across a variety of ethnic backgrounds. By drawing parallels between the experiences of all parties caught into the violence, the programme sets the stage for reconciliation with the past\textsuperscript{75} across religious and ethnic communities. If *WDYTYA* ‘marked a renewed PSB ethos that focused on the construction of Britishness and national identity; PSB as nation-building rather than nation-binding’,\textsuperscript{76} *MFPM* ups the game by exploring the roots of South Asia’s relation to Britain since colonial times and by actively including British Asian citizens into the realm of Britishness.

However, as Hall argued, ‘there is always a price of incorporation to be paid when the cutting edge of difference and transgression is blunted into spectacularization […]

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what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility’. In this respect, Evans’ reflections on the limits of historical TV formats such as WDYTYA can be applied to MFPM too: even though she praises the show for being ‘an excellent example of the ways in which social history can transform people’s lives in the present’, she acknowledges that the constraints of the TV format lead to ‘imbalances and gaps in the historical account’. In this particular case, the visibility accorded to Partition is conditional on a strongly individualised, emotional perspective. If the focus on ordinary people is particularly important for progressive historiography, and indeed an emotional approach to personal stories can provide a valuable point of entry into the past, the emphasis on individual narratives in MFPM leaves comparably less space for a critical engagement with the broader context of imperial politics. This is largely because the common individualised presentation of Partition stories in MFPM allows for the construction of an equivalence between the experiences of different communities, flattening out historical socio-political differences and the subsequent communal relations contingent upon them. Holdsworth notes that programmes like WDYTYA open up ‘a vision of multicultural British heritage’ but they do so ‘whilst closing down or ‘taming’ our relationships to difficult and contested areas of history’. In this case, MFPM refrains from fully engaging with the history of the British empire as a political, cultural and economic enterprise. While Partition is defined as a ‘British-led plan’, it does not explore the root of communal violence and colonial domination as a central factor in communal tension in South Asia. The taming of this relationship is directly achieved via the emphasis placed on individualised perspectives which elide connections to wider social, political and economic processes, hinted at but side-lined in the main narrative in MFPM. As Arrow observes, the exploration of historical events through the experience of the individual, while affording viewers the possibility to establish a connection to the past, at the same time runs the risk of narrowing their historical perspective:

The audience is exposed to many individual pieces of a broader picture, but might never put the entire picture together. [...] In this context, an emotional understanding of the past is easier to graft onto one’s existing historical consciousness, even if such an approach has clear limitations in reaching a deeper historical understanding.

Approaching history through emotions, according to Arrow, can thus deepen viewers’ historical understanding, but especially so if they have some pre-existing historical knowledge. If commemorative programmes on television provide ‘a notable contribution to the circulation of public knowledge about the past’, then in this case the broader context of imperial politics is marginalised in favour of personal tales of sufferance and resilience. Even though the majority of our research participants praised MFPM for bringing attention to a largely forgotten British (Asian) historical event, and for its human angle, the show’s minimal exploration of imperial politics was criticised by one interviewee, a British Asian man in his thirties, who commented that Partition was represented as ‘a bad event that happened [...] without acknowledging any responsibility’, adding that the show felt ‘very pacifying’. And yet the very structure of the show has the potential to destabilise this narrative. Even though there is minimal engagement with the politics of the empire, the positionality of the narrator-protagonist as a British Asian woman
whose personal family story emerges at the intersection of empire and postcolonial migration, offers the possibility of opening up new ways of thinking about Partition and the empire.

Conclusions

Writing about the relationship between remembering and forgetting in public media, Huyssen observes that ‘media do not transport public memory innocently’. \cite{Huyssen} The role of memories in creating a connection between past and present in this context serves the purpose of fostering inter-communal harmony in present-day Britain by offering a selected point of view on the past. But as Keightley notes: ‘seeing remembering as a process of constructing a relationship between past and present implies that choices and exclusions are made in mnemonic accounts, and suggests that other versions of the past may have been possible’. \cite{Keightley} The textual construction of mnemonic accounts in MFPM leaves Partition carefully circumscribed within the boundaries of the ‘temporary madness’ narrative, limiting opportunities to directly confront the politics of decolonisation, and allowing the colonial past to remain at the margins of British history.

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Notes

1. Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 3.
2. Darlymple, “The Great Divide.”
3. Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*; Das, *Life and Words*.
4. Butalia, Ibid.; Pandey, *Remembering Partition*.
5. So much so that it is not included in the UK national curriculum (see Elahi, “Nations Divided,” 2017).
6. BBC, “70 Years On: Partition Stories.”
7. The full list is available on the BBC’s dedicated website, Ibid.
8. Edgerton, “Introduction,” 1.
9. Das, *Life and Words*.
10. See Hornabrook, Clini, and Keightley, forthcoming, for a deeper discussion of the research’s arts-based methodological approach.
11. BARB.
12. Morley and Robins, *Spaces of Identity*, 10.
13. Gray and Bell, *History on Television*, 100.
14. Thussu, “Conference Review,” 456.
15. Sardar, “South Asia,” 889.
16. BBC, India and Pakistan.
17. In 1997 the BBC World Service ran a series entirely dedicated on Partition, and in 2017, Radio 4 as well as regional radios such as Radio Norfolk and Radio Derby featured interviews of British Asian people whose families had been affected by Partition. In 2017 BBC also transmitted the documentary The Day India Burned: Partition. Gray and Bell, History on Television, 199.
18. Gray, “Televised Remembering,” 81.
19. Williams, “Flattened Visions,” 127.
20. Humphreys, “Media freedom,” 203.
21. Ibid.
22. Jenkins, “Broadcasting Quality”; Mulgan, “Quality in Broadcasting.”
23. Hodkinson, Media, Culture and Society, 158. See also BRU, “Quality in Television.”
24. For a detailed analysis of the digital switchover and its effect on public service broadcasting in the UK see Smith and Steemers, “BBC to the rescue.”
25. Collins, “BBC and Public Value,” 168.
26. Smith and Steemers, “BBC to the Rescue,” 45.
27. Collins, “BBC and Public Value,” 167.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 3.
30. BBC, Building Public Value, 8.
31. Ibid., 70.
32. Ibid.
33. BBC Annual report 2007/08
34. O’Hagan, “Introducing.”
35. Freedman, A Future, 3.
36. DCMS, BBC for the Future, 40–41. Unresolved issues of race within the organisation were particularly highlighted in the handling of the Naga Munchetty case in 2019, with reference to the BBC’s roots in the imperial past. Ibrahim and Howarth, “The Munchetty Controversy.”
37. McGrath, “BBC Charter Renewal,” 7.
38. BBC, “BBC Charter Renewal”; see also DCMS, BBC for the Future, 41.
39. BBC, Annual Report 2017/2018, 40.
40. Williams, “Flattened Visions,” 127.
41. Edgerton, “Introduction,” 3–4.
42. Gamson, The Unwatched Life.
43. Williams, “Flattened Visions,” 127.
44. The weakening of the working class, Williams suggests, is a consequence of years of Thatcherian politics which re-designed the British economy (see Williams 130) and privileged the individual over society.
45. Ibid., 130.
46. Brown, “Television Goes Back.”
47. Gray and Bell, History, 63.
48. Holdsworth, “Who Do You Think,” 235.
49. Lynch, “Who Do You Think.”
50. Holdsworth, “Who Do You Think,” 235.
51. BBC, “My Family, Partition and Me.”
52. Ibid.
53. Watson, “Ordering the family,” 297.
54. Corner, “Once Upon a Time.”
55. Ibid., 14.
56. Bell and Gray, History on Television,” 123.
57. Williams, “Flattened Visions,” 133.
58. Corner, “Once Upon a Time,” 15.
59. Ibid.
60. Hunt, “Reality, Identity,” 845.
61. Gray and Bell, History, 85.
62. Pandey, Remembering Partition, 1.
63. Nandy, “The invisible Holocaust.”
64. Ibid., 322.
65. Bhabha. The Location of Culture, 90.
66. Nandy, “The invisible Holocaust,” 322.
67. Corner, “Once Upon a Time,” 16.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid., 15.
70. Corner, “Sounds Real,” 358–9.
71. Malik, Representing Black Britain, 10.
72. Gray and Bell, History, 83–4.
73. Arrow, “Emotions,” 597. See also Landsberg’s analysis of mass media as producers of prosthetic memories which facilitate identification and empathy across racial and ethnic lines, paving the way for “unexpected political alliances”, “Prosthetic Memories,” 149.
74. Even though some scholars criticise the show for offering a simplified vision of genealogical research (see Lynch, “Who Do You Think”), the contribution of professional historians has been praised by viewers and family historians alike for showing the “process of research”, see Gray and Bell, History, 85.
75. Keightley, “Remembering Research,” 57.
76. Holdsworth, “Who Do You Think,” 244.
77. Hall, “What is Black,” 107.
78. Evans, “Who do You Think,” 467.
79. Ibid., 460.
80. Holdsworth, “Who Do You Think,” 235.
81. Nandy, “The invisible Holocaust.”
82. Arrow, “Who do You Think,” 601.
83. Ibid., 602.
84. Gray, “Televised Remembering,” 81.
85. Huysen, “Present Pasts,” 30.
86. Keightley, “Remembering Research,” 57.
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Clelia Clini (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Loughborough University-London, London E20 3BS, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. E-mail: C.Clini@lboro.ac.uk

Jasmine Hornabrook, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. E-mail: J.Hornabrook@lboro.ac.uk

Emily Keightley, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. E-mail: E.Keightley@lboro.ac.uk