Personal Memory as a Lens to Understand Collective Trauma in *Amu*

Shonali Bose's Amu (2005) is a powerful cinematic engagement with the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, a moment of collective national trauma that remains inadequately addressed within official histories. Rather than presenting the riots through graphic spectacle or linear historical narration, Amu adopts personal memory as its primary narrative lens. Through the gradual awakening of Amu's suppressed childhood memories, the film demonstrates how collective trauma survives within individual lives, resurfacing through fragmented recollections, emotional disquiet, and belated recognition. In doing so, Amu reveals that historical violence cannot be fully understood without listening to personal testimonies that resist silence and erasure.

At the centre of the film is Amu, a young Indian-American woman who returns to India following the death of her adoptive mother. Initially detached and emotionally guarded, Amu has no conscious memory of the violence that shaped her early life. Yet her visit to Delhi triggers a series of unsettling sensations, flashbacks, and emotional responses, suggesting that memory, particularly traumatic memory, does not disappear but remains latent within the body and psyche. As the film unfolds, Amu's personal journey becomes a metaphor for a nation's unresolved past.

Trauma in Amu is not presented as a complete or coherent narrative; instead, it is fragmented, repressed, and indirect. This reflects the nature of traumatic memory itself. Trauma is experienced belatedly and returns in fragments rather than as a continuous story. Amu's memories emerge in flashes—through sounds, faces, and places—rather than explicit recollection. Her sense that "something is wrong" precedes her understanding of what happened. This is evident when Amu confesses her discomfort, saying, "I don't remember my childhood… but it feels like something terrible happened". This line underscores the film's insistence that memory can exist without conscious recall, shaping identity even in silence.

The collective trauma of the 1984 riots enters the film through Amu's personal history. As the truth is gradually revealed, we learn that Amu is a Sikh child whose parents were brutally killed during the riots, while she narrowly escaped death. Her survival, however, comes at the cost of memory. The deliberate suppression of her past—carried out in the name of protection—mirrors the state-sponsored forgetting that followed the riots. Just as Amu is shielded from the truth, the nation too is encouraged to move on without accountability. In this way, the personal becomes deeply political.

Kabir, Amu's childhood friend, functions as a crucial figure of remembrance. Unlike Amu, Kabir remembers the violence vividly and refuses to let it be erased. His repeated insistence that the truth must be acknowledged highlights the ethical responsibility of witnessing. He declares, "People were burned alive, and the country chose to forget", a

line that directly indicts national silence and institutional complicity. Kabir's memory represents a counter-archive to official history, one grounded in lived experience rather than sanctioned narratives.

The film's narrative structure reinforces this thematic concern. Amu avoids chronological storytelling and instead unfolds through revelations, delays, and withheld information. This mirrors the process of trauma recovery, where truth emerges slowly and often painfully. When Amu finally learns the truth about her parents' deaths, it is not through dramatic confrontation but through quiet disclosure. Her reaction is marked by shock and grief rather than catharsis. She asks, "Why didn't anyone tell me?", a question that resonates beyond her personal experience to interrogate societal silence around mass violence.

Women play a particularly significant role in preserving and transmitting memory in Amu. Key female characters—Amu's aunt, her adoptive mother, and other survivors—carry emotional burdens that reflect gendered experiences of trauma. While men like Kabir articulate memory through anger and activism, women often internalize pain through silence and endurance. Yet this silence should not be mistaken for passivity. It is a survival strategy in a world unwilling to listen. As one character remarks, "Some wounds are too deep to speak of", encapsulating the cost of survival in the aftermath of violence.

Amu's transformation over the course of the film illustrates how reclaiming personal memory enables engagement with collective trauma. By the end, Amu no longer seeks comfort in ignorance. She chooses awareness, even though it brings pain. Her decision to stay in India and confront her past signals a refusal to participate in forgetting. Memory here becomes an ethical act—a way of honouring the dead and resisting injustice. As Amu comes to realize, "If I forget, then they die all over again." This statement captures the film's central moral argument: remembering is a form of resistance.

Cinematically, Bose reinforces the theme of memory through silence, muted colours, and restrained performances. The absence of graphic riot scenes is deliberate. By focusing on aftermath rather than spectacle, Amu foregrounds emotional truth over sensationalism. This restraint ensures that the audience engages with trauma as a lived reality rather than distant history. The film thus aligns with testimonial narratives that privilege personal voice over official documentation.

In conclusion, Amu powerfully demonstrates that personal memory is indispensable to understanding collective trauma. Through Amu's journey from amnesia to awareness, the film exposes the limitations of state narratives and the necessity of individual testimony. The 1984 anti-Sikh riots are not presented as a closed chapter of history but as a continuing wound that survives in memory, silence, and unresolved grief. By

reclaiming her past, Amu not only recovers her identity but also restores a fragment of collective history. In doing so, Amu insists that justice begins with remembering—and that memory, however painful, is the first step toward healing.