

State Power, Silence, and Complicity in *Amu*

Shonali Bose's *Amu* (2005) is a deeply political film that interrogates the relationship between the Indian state and the violence of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. Rather than portraying the riots as spontaneous communal eruptions, *Amu* exposes them as events enabled—and in many instances orchestrated—by state power, administrative silence, and institutional complicity. Through its focus on survivors, witnesses, and suppressed memories, the film reveals how the state's failure to acknowledge responsibility perpetuates trauma and denies justice. *Amu* thus emerges not merely as a narrative of personal loss but as an indictment of systemic violence and moral abdication.

One of the most striking features of *Amu* is its refusal to separate communal violence from political authority. The film repeatedly suggests that the riots were not isolated acts of mob fury but were facilitated by the inaction—and at times active participation—of state institutions. This is most evident in the absence of timely police intervention during the violence. Survivors recall how law enforcement either remained passive or collaborated with rioters. A key line captures this chilling reality: "The police stood by while people were being burned alive." This statement directly implicates the state in the production of violence, transforming it from a neutral arbiter into a silent accomplice.

State power in *Amu* operates not only through physical force but also through control over memory and narrative. The post-riot period is marked by official silence, delayed inquiries, and ineffective commissions that offer the appearance of justice without delivering accountability. Kabir's bitter observation—"They formed committees, wrote reports, and then buried them"—underscores how bureaucratic processes are used to neutralize dissent and erase inconvenient truths. In this sense, the state's power lies as much in what it refuses to say as in what it enforces.

Silence becomes a dominant motif in the film, functioning as both a political strategy and a psychological burden. On a national level, silence allows the state to avoid responsibility and maintain its legitimacy. On a personal level, it forces survivors to internalize grief and fear. *Amu*'s own life is shaped by silence: her past is deliberately concealed in order to protect her from trauma. However, this enforced forgetting mirrors the state's suppression of collective memory. As *Amu* asks upon learning the truth, "Why didn't anyone tell me?", her question resonates as a broader indictment of a society that chooses comfort over truth.

The film makes clear that silence is not neutral; it is a form of complicity. By failing to acknowledge violence, the state effectively validates it. This is evident in the lack of punishment for perpetrators, many of whom continue to hold positions of power. Kabir articulates this bitter truth when he states, "The killers were rewarded, not punished."

Such moments expose how state power protects itself by shielding those responsible, thereby normalizing injustice. The absence of accountability sends a clear message: certain lives are expendable, and certain crimes can be forgotten.

Amu also critiques the selective nature of state mourning. While the assassination of political leaders is publicly commemorated, the mass suffering of ordinary citizens is rendered invisible. This imbalance reveals the hierarchy of grief within nationalist narratives. The deaths of thousands of Sikhs are reduced to footnotes, while official ceremonies emphasize unity and progress. Through this contrast, the film exposes how state-sponsored remembrance often serves political ends rather than ethical responsibility.

Kabir's role as a political activist highlights resistance to this enforced silence. Unlike Amu, who begins the film unaware of her past, Kabir refuses to forget. He actively documents testimonies, confronts officials, and insists on remembering the names and faces of the dead. His statement—"If we stop speaking, it's as if it never happened"—captures the film's insistence on memory as a form of resistance. Kabir represents an alternative mode of citizenship, one that challenges state narratives and demands ethical accountability.

Women in Amu occupy a particularly complex position in relation to state violence. They are both victims and bearers of memory, often silenced by social expectations and political neglect. Amu's aunt embodies this quiet suffering; her decision to conceal the past reflects both fear of reopening wounds and mistrust in state justice. The film thus reveals how state complicity extends into private spaces, shaping familial relationships and personal identities. Trauma, in Amu, is not confined to public events but permeates domestic life.

Cinematically, Bose reinforces these themes through restraint and minimalism. The riots themselves are largely absent from the screen, emphasizing their aftermath rather than their spectacle. This absence mirrors the state's erasure of violence from official discourse. Silence, long pauses, and subdued soundscapes force viewers to confront what is not shown or said. The film's refusal to dramatize violence becomes an ethical choice, aligning with its critique of state narratives that sensationalize events while avoiding responsibility.

By the end of the film, Amu offers no easy resolution. Justice remains elusive, and the state remains largely unaccountable. Yet the film insists on the necessity of bearing witness. Amu's decision to stay in India and confront her past signifies a rejection of imposed silence. Her journey suggests that while the state may control institutions, it cannot fully extinguish memory. As the film implicitly argues, remembering is an act of defiance against power structures that thrive on forgetting.

In conclusion, Amu presents a searing critique of state power, silence, and complicity in the context of communal violence. By foregrounding survivor narratives and suppressed memories, the film exposes how the state's failure to act—and its deliberate erasure of truth—deepens trauma and perpetuates injustice. Amu ultimately insists that democracy without accountability is hollow, and that true reconciliation is impossible without acknowledgement. Through its quiet yet powerful storytelling, the film challenges viewers to question not only what the state does, but what it chooses to ignore—and at what cost.