

Partition As Memory: Construing Women Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Writing about partition is a form of collective memory, and it has aroused the interest of a number of authors. Partition literature delineates the stings of partition with empathy as well as sympathy. When reading history of India's partition, one notices that the live stories of women are frequently omitted. Although portrayed within the framework of a secular, liberal democratic society, the contextual of India's partition produced through official documents, transfer of power, and constitutional history was rife with gender, religious, caste, and class biases. Women writers writing on partition history have begun to dismantle the ostensibly gender-neutral discourse of this history through the use of alternate source materials like as personal testimonials, autobiographies, and interviews with persons affected by it. The motivation for demolishing a homogenized partition history is to highlight the agony and suffering of women.

Women writers selected in this study have voiced the sentiments and sufferings of women during Partition in their narratives. These writers effectively trace the painful exodus that followed the announcement of partition, the separation of life long friends and relatives, the reluctance of people to leave their homes and the travails the displaced refugees faced while making their way to India. They have tried to show how women were reduced merely as bodies, carrying the burden of honor of their community. Through their female characters these women novelists have tried to emphasize the social, physical, emotional, psychological and cultural effects of holocaust of partition on lives of women. They have intoned the female side of history to Partition literature by focusing the female stories at the centre of their narratives.

Key Words: Partition, Gender, Feministic Perspectives, Narratives.

Introduction

India's division is regarded the most painful occurrence in recent Indian history. 'The Partition of India in 1947 recorded one of the most massive peace-time upheavals ever, and it is generally agreed that its reverberations persisted and are still being felt, with varying degrees of intensity, in the three countries most affected by it' (Menon 2). Approximately 10–12.5 million people moved in both directions across the newly created borders of Pakistan and India and approximately one million were killed in the process. Approximately 75,000 women were abducted in the process (Butalia 132).

Women's writing on partition is a crucial venue for understanding the role of resilience and remembrance, especially because patriarchal cultures have buried women's experiences and histories for many centuries. As a result, the fabled accounts of women's history represent a large portion of unacknowledged personal and communal histories. The purpose of this thesis is to uncover women's memories and histories during India's division. The fictional works chosen for this purpose tend to express women's Holocaust experiences and memories, highlighting a new way of conceiving women's stories, memories, and identities.

Paul Connerton opines, “all beginnings contain an element of recollection stressing upon the fact that it is not possible to obliterate the past completely as every new beginning relies on the habits and loyalties of discarded past”(56). Similarly in views of Marc Auge, “Remembering or forgetting is doing gardener’s work selecting, pruning, memory and forgetting are in constant negotiation in the construction of the past”(75). The intersection of collective memories of partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947 reveals the trauma experienced by nations as well as individuals. Partition memories haunt the psychic life and form the terrain- which faces the further violence on the name of state and takes on intimate and sexual charges. For women traumatic memories were more painful as they were also bodily memories and as such, bodies became important sites of memory in analysis of aftermaths of partition. During partition women were unmoored from their most kinship and community bonds. As liminal subjects in patriarchal networks, women suffer greater abuse when these bonds are lost. The post partition memorial precinct of South Asia is habituated by the distorted shadows of Hindu Muslim binary. The tragedies meted out by partition were equally faced by the women either belonging to Hindu community or Muslim. Partition validated the violence-particularly the gendered violence- as an intermediary of articulating citizenship, identity and belongingness. In her book *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender and National Culture in Postcolonial India*, Kavita Daiya sums up that, “the partition constitutes a field of transformation and a discourse that became the condition of possibility for the gendered ethnicization of citizenship and belonging in Postcolonial South Asia”(23).

About 71 years ago, multitudinous women crossed the border and faced unimaginable violence. Though scores of years have passed but still the scars are afresh, wounds

still unhealed, a generation of women with wet eyes and affrighting memories are still holding up the unheard tales in the recesses of their heart. Radcliff’s plan of drawing borders between India and Pakistan affected the women folk most severely. They were the worst sufferers of this “slaughter –house circus”, not only raped, maimed and brutalized but forced to commit suicide in order to save family name. With the history of genocides in the partition, the subcontinent seethes with unvented traumatic memories. In Derrida’s views mourning and memory share involutes relationship, mourning is a result of memory and the act and process of mourning, directly or indirectly elicit memory. In her article “Partition’s Post-Amnesia”, Ananya Kabir coins a term “Post-amnesia” referring to recollection of memory and links the past after the nationally and psychologically enforced amnesia of 1947. She also points out that Hirsch’s term “post-memory” i.e. memory of the memory”(111) – is most appropriately used for the narratives of survivors of traumatic events of Partition.

The saga of partition narrated by women takes a different turn in comparison to male narration as a woman can better portray the psychic mind of women, the feeling of inferiority, a sense of contempt for their own sex. The female narratives focus on personal loss, traumatic family separations and many unheard experiences rather than political and economical concerns. These micro-narratives containing fractured realities are the real gendered narratives depicting the division of India into Hindustan and Pakistan. Factors like personal corroborations, expediency of reconstructing biographies, collaborative re-telling of tragedy have accentuated the need of alternative (from female perspective) depiction of tale of partition. This feminist historiography feature the double fold insights into the female suffrage. Firstly, the planned physical violence on the female bodies

by engraving religious tattoos (here female body is taken as a territory where the sign demarcated the area of conqueror, because patriarchal order associates the 'honor' with dignity of the community) and Secondly, the perpetration of female suicides in the name of honor. The oral history emphasizes the facts that female bodies become cite of parochial nation-state fantasies and women specially got entangled violently with the nation- state. And the feat of distorting, vexing and raping women becomes a metonym for disfiguring and denigrating the nation and community. Religion and freedom became pretextto fulfill the brutish desires of men-women became victims of religious propaganda, caught in the maelstrom of rapacious lust.

Moreover the introduction of Abduction Bill (Recovery and Restoration) in India after a year of independence disturbed the lives of women who already settled themselves with their new homes, and were on the onset of convenient amnesia about the traumatic experiences faced by them. But this act of enforcement by State instead of proving helpful for women turned out to be more devastating as these women were not accepted by their biological families after their 'honor' was lost. Women suffered the pain of being uprooted twice-once they were separated from their parents and again when they were snatched from their new families by insensitive State, after having reconciled with their fate. Gender identity is dependent upon historical and contextual and thus is fluid, especially in context of India, female identities are so enmeshed in patriarchal code of conduct, that even if women try to carve a niche for them their speech and acts are construed within the same boundaries which they are trying to negotiate.

Though a plethora of narratives about the 1947 partition are available, highlighting the violence, mass killings, migrations, homelessness, alienation, etc. leading to incalculable national loss, yet history is

comparatively silent in regard to recordings of countless individual stories of victimhood, and trauma encoded with enforced silences. Such histories remained less discovered firstly due to the veil of shame and trauma and secondly because of lack of male attestation. Through the fictionalization of partition discourse the writers of partition fiction underscore the trauma and loss endured by hundreds of people. Much attention has been focused on the male partition experiences as narrated by males, the literary and historical discourses lag behind in depicting the female experiences. Therefore, referring to selected works written by female writers i.e. *Ice-Candy Man* by Bapsi Sidwa, *What the Body Remembers* by Shauna Singh Baldwin and *Pinjar* by Amrita Pritam, the paper will focus on women experiences during partition through intersectional analysis of these narratives. The purpose behind selecting these texts is to bring to forefront the submissive and silent feminine endurances towards the violence perpetrated during partition and it's after effects on their lives. Along with this the depiction of female experiences in these fictional works also shed light on the socio-political context of the times, generating different perspectives on the processes at work which shaped up the partition and its aftermaths. These texts perceptively garner the social and historical condition of women both displaced and non-displaced. Bishnupriya Ghosh opines, "Women often find themselves in contextually marginal positions which distance them from instruments in national interests, and enable them to critique or interrogate both conceptions of nation and the power of the nation-state"(134).

Bapsi Sidwa's novel *Ice Candy Man* is a coetaneous chronicle representing human loss, exculpation of Parsee traditions, a tale of women's trauma and suffering, and an attempt to revisits history. In her novel she has presented an urban origin to the violence of partition. Through

her novel she tries to portray partition as a tragedy which curtailed a life shared decencies for women; a wear in which the sites of contest are the women of other community. Sidwa narrates a story with women at epicenter either as motifs of familiar and political power, bearers of men's honor, or trophies of war. Ice Candy Man delineate the turmoil of times through the medium of narrator Lenny's Hindu ayah Shanta's abduction by a group of Muslim men in leadership of Ice –Candy Man, one of her former Muslim suitor. Shanta's story is symbolic of the stories of thousands of the women that were abducted and then raped by the men in order to quench their thirst for revenge. The novelist realistically portrays women's plight and exploitation in pre-partition patriarchal society. Novel foregrounds women's consciousness as they are affected by political battles. Life before partition seems to be peaceful in the novel. The narrator Lenny moves around in the city with help of her ayah. Ayah is presented as sexually empowered women with a resplendent physical appearance who has many wooers. Everything goes well till the arrival of a train from India in which Ice Candy man expects his relatives to return to Lahore. The train arrives loaded with dead bodies instead of passengers. The women passengers were first tortured, raped and then slaughtered. The train consisted of two sacks full of women's breasts. This makes the Ice-Candy man mad with rage and in order to take revenge on the people of warring community, he decide to kidnap Ayah, a Hindu girl. In his leadership, the mob abducts Ayah, she is raped, maimed and is transformed into a dancing girl. He forcefully marries her and changes her name from Shanta to Mumtaz, changing her identity highlighting the baneful effects of partition violence which not only shattered her physically but also led to her fragmented identity. During the conclusive section of novel she wishes to go for India, as she finds India associated with her Hindu identity she

being Hindu felt alienated in Pakistan, a land for Muslims.

Novel establishes the pernicious role of religious fundamentalism in affecting two nations in general and women in particular. Ayah was the one who suffered the impact of partition the most. The locus of the story of Ayah is on the abduction of women as the symbiotic omphalos of communal violence as well as correlation of female 'shame' with male 'honor'. Due to which desecration of female body is linked with defilement of male's honor, not only in times of partition but always in patriarchal societies. Debali Mookherjee Leonard aptly says:

The Partition riots of 1946-47 and the destabilization of community alliances that they entailed also treated women's bodies as a site for the performance of identity. According to the same patriarchal logic that resulted in the mass rape of women from the "other" religious community (Muslim), the "purity" of Hindu and Sikh women became a political prerequisite for their belonging in the new nation. In the communal violence surrounding partition, Hindu and Sikh women sometimes committed suicide or were murdered by male kin, and these acts—designed to thwart the rival community's (Muslim) aims to dishonor the nation by violating its women—were lauded as self-sacrifice by the women's family(35-50).

Ice Candy Man indeed presents a significant view of reality from gynocentric perspective in the backdrop of religious turbulence.

Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* rotates around the pharanoic canvas of pre and post Indian Independence. The novel is not just about polygamous marriage but is an allegory for the partition period. Baldwin in

her very first novel analyses the resistance shown by women towards radicalized and sexualized violence at the backdrop of awful historical incident of partition between India and Pakistan. Against the milieu of political and religious strife during the times of partition, Baldwin delineates a compelling saga of personal lives of three remarkable characters: Sadarji, affluent landlord, Satya, his wife, and Roop a village girl who marries Sardarji in order to provide him children. Baldwin's novel visualizes the partition from women's perspectives. It is an aphonic revolt against the muffled silences of women at the triple level of dream, body and soul. As a terrified observer of the scary days of partition brutality, Roop courageously makes her way to Delhi to join her husband. During her eight days stay at Railway station of Delhi, waiting for Sardarji. Roop is brought face to face with the sights to destruction and displacement. Trains full of dead bodies, odor of urine and bloodshed, fear of displacement in the eyes of the people, leaves her in a state of apathy. Roop is further traumatized by her brother Jeevan's account of Kusum's (his wife) death in her ancestral village PariDarwaza. Kusum's body was cut up in multiple act of horrendous violence with the disintegrated fragments then reassembled with removed womb. In their article "Sexual Objectification of Women: Advances to Theory & Research," Szymanski, Moffit and Erika write, "Women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to be valued for its use by others. Sexual objectification occurs when a woman's body or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire"(38).

The novel's focus is on women's experiences of violence and trauma during partition. In the following explanation, Baldwin advances the idea that rape, abduction, sexual abuse, murder, and mutilation were common motifs of violence and revenge meted out on

female bodies during religious disputes. This leaves an everlasting impression on any nation's collective memory, which, when reshuffled, manifests itself as an outpouring of emotions, like in the narrative *What the Body Remembers*.

Clearly expressing the title of novel "What the Body Remembers" – this dismembered, remembered body highlights the gendered embodied remembering and draws attention to women's suffering. "a woman's body lay beneath, each limb severed at the joint. This body was sliced into six parts, then arranged to look as if whole again"(510). Kusum's killing metaphorises the partition of nation on one hand and community's legitimization on the other. Jeevan was unaware of the fact that Kusum was not killed by the mob, but beheaded by his own father in order to save her honor and then her body by mistreated by angry mob. This, concentration of both kind of violence (by family members and by mob belonging to another community) onto the same site (Kusum's body) highlight the traumatic split representing partition in metaphors of birth, severance and sacrifice.

The fate of other female characters like Revathi Bhua, Gujri, Joremon, etc. accentuate the fact that gendered bodies not only served as sites of violence but also as living archives to store the memory of violence. Baldwin's characterization of women in both forms of subjectivity, that challenges the distinction between "active" and "passive" shows her adroitness in expressing female experiences impeccably. *What the Body Remembers* depict passel of violations undertaken by a female body during the time of partition and presents how these violated female bodies became an instrument to convey multiple social meanings leading to framing of gendered experiences.

Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* explicitly deals with the dislocation and violence against women during the partition holocaust. She has

tried to construct a narrative of partition from the women's point of view. The novel heaves the quandary situation of a woman who strives through the pain of displacement and abduction. It also highlights the different aspects of violence against women, not only at physical or mental levels but also at religious and social levels. It is a saga of de-territorialized woman who endures the trauma of denegation by her own parents and emerges as a stronger woman with a sense of abetment for other suffering women in the milieu of communal and patriarchal injustices. The novel highlights the fate of central character Pooro, a victim of rapacious battle between the two communities. Being abducted by Rashida few days before her marriage Pooro not only loses her contact with her natal family, but also is forced to change her religion to that of her husband and was called "Hamida", after her forced marriage with Rashida. Pritam describe Pooro's ordeal by outlining the pain she feels when her mother articulates before severing all the ties from her, "this fate was ordained for you. We are helpless". Completely torn and tormented by rejections from her family, she ultimately accepts a loveless marriage to Rashida, but her personality undergoes a change and she becomes a victim of fragmented identity. Pooro feels herself helpless against the socio-political and cultural forces tearing her soul. She feels loss of self and identity. Life without her identity is compared by her to a Pinjar (Skeleton) devoid of flesh. Pritam skillful states "it was a double life, Hamida by day, Pooro by night. In reality she was neither one nor the others; she was just a skeleton without a shape or name"(p.11). Nonica Datta opines, "Pooro's fluid identity problematize rigidly conceived identities showing how the victims of partition assume, though not easily, individually and culturally defined roles"(22).

The other female characters of the novel, mad woman, Kammo and Taro are also oppressed under the double yoke of patriarchy and

consequences of colonialism. Their discourse strongly remonstrate the portrait of a nation which is made out of fix religious and gendered identities. Pinjar also problematizes the issue of "recovery" for the abducted women, after passing of the Abducted persons Bill on 15 Dec, 1949. The process of recovery was solely based on religious and communal terms giving no importance to individual factors.

Thus novel postulates women's experiences during the traumatic times of partition of 1947. It highlights the fact that the process of identity formation in case of dislocated women is highly daedal and psychologically complex. The study of novel reveals the fact that religious frenzy played a fatal role in formation of boundaries and the irrational contestation of powers during partition which laid an adverse effect on lives of common man especially women belonging to both the communities. Thus, Pinjar presents an acerbic critique of the pre and post partition society which forced women's bodies to reduce to skeletons devoid of emotions and identities.

This sojourn of women narratives unveils a discernable shift from politically decked discourse to depiction of gendered pain of dislocation and disassociation. The women authors chosen for study viewed the partition in different ways; as a vivisection that leads to decimation of gendered histories; as an enigma which inhibit dreams and as a tragedy which affected women, their response and their resiliencies. Their novels present both the prologue and epilogue to partition and circumscribe between them the pitiable plight of women both as victims and agents. Felskisums up, "Many women writing in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have created new plot possibilities for their narratives, memories and lives by "subverting, fragmenting, disrupting.....,

undermining.....rearranging, modifying, supplementing and expanding”(12).

Spatial and temporal positioning of women in enactments of violence presented in these women narratives is very crucial. As these acts of violence highlights the position of women’s sexuality in stereotyped male patriarchal society between and within the boundaries of religious and ethnic communities. These partition novels confute Aristotle’s dictum “poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen”, as they depict what seen, felt and experienced by female during the traumatic event of partition.

Partition, in these novels is not presented, only in form of ruptured nations, but in ruptured lives of citizens of both the nations to a new level of beholding the world and but also to formation of weaving memories and reminiscences. According to Gyanendra Pandey, “there exists a rift between ‘history and memory’, for the survivors from the partition, the memories and trauma produced by the violence will not be buried with dead, and the wounds will live forever with them”(94).

These novels have delved deep to bring up the ramifications of partition as a traumatic history that still cast its spell upon the survivors. In their own ways, all three narratives scum up the experiences evolving from varied losses; the loss of self/ identity, loss of home and loss of dear ones. These “testimonies of loss and memory” not only bring to surface the fact that partition can’t be buried as a past, but also assists to observe the success and failures of nationstatehood, and also highlight the fact that it is not easy for survivors of partition to extricate the memories of anti colonial struggle from the more distressing memories of “self”.

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