

Collective Amnesia: Dalit Women and Post-Partition Motherhood

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Abstract:

This paper strives to readdress The Partition of India, concentrating specifically on women's history and the tortuous series of forces, circumstances, and desires associated with them. Apart from examining the suffering of women, this paper also analyzes how the women writers have articulated the emotions and trauma of women during partition, which in most of the male narratives is omitted. The other silenced issue in the partition narratives is about Dalits, especially Dalit women. They are found at the edge of the records. The geographical division carried the division of collective memories, traditions, and antiquities which was common among the communities is also discussed in the paper. Post-partition women refugees were overshadowed by gender discrimination, identity crisis, and most significantly pressure of motherhood. They were expected to rebuild and restore, forgive and forget.

Keywords: Partition, Women, Dalit, Motherhood, Trauma.

Partition's origin has its roots in religion. Colonists played the game of 'divide and rule' ('divide et impera) and used religion to separate people in India.

Establishment of Hindu-Muslim enmity was the prominent achievement of British imperial society and religion became an agent in politics. To develop intersecting consciousness between the two communities, a systematic policy was introduced where they not only formed separate votes lists of Hindus and Muslims but also created distinct seats reserved for Hindu politicians and Muslim politicians. Britishers assured that before their departure, the Muslim League ought to be strengthened to an extent that it can claim for a discrete homeland for Muslims to shatter the dream of a united India. Muslim Indians were distressed about their existence in a Hindu-majority country and therefore, Muslim league leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah called for partition with an aim of independent settlement. Dr. Gareth Price, at the UK-based Chatham House foreign-policy institute, says: "It would have taken a long time to get agreement about how a united India would work," Partition seemed to be a quick and simple solution."

The year 1947, for India, was noteworthy and dramatic, because the nation not only earned independence from British colonial rule but also experienced partition, on the very day of independence. Torn into two parts, the subcontinent underwent apocalyptic circumstances, forming new nation-states: India and Pakistan. Illuminating celebration of freedom and victory from Britain was darkened by the cries of millions, who drowned in the river of bloodshed and unutterable violence. The partition was followed by enormous migration and unimaginable massacre in human history with corpses scattered on the roads, trains loaded with decollated bodies, sexual violence, and vandalism. "In the space of a few months, about twelve million people moved between the new, truncated India and two wings, East and

West, of the newly created Pakistan.” (Butalia, 3) Mass destruction and pillaging also induced psychological troubles, like the eradication of one’s homeland or fragmentation of families. As an incident of devastating circumstances, the partition is still a climacteric event in the people’s consciousness, and in the lives of those who are striving to find themselves again after having lost sight of their motherland.

The partition renderings limit their focus to male political leaders who indulged in the decision making process during and after the partition. The conventional historical accounts narrowed their emphasis only to the political practices of the Indian National Congress Party and Muslim League and paid minimal attention to the human cost of partition. Gradually, after several attempts, the human side was unveiled but those narratives had negligible weight on what partition distinctively meant for women. Often the narratives are written by men and therefore entitling men as heroes, whereas female involvement is neglected. The repressed lives of these women were a direct result of finding no vessel to contain their experience of partition. The stories of women were muted, half told, and thus remained incomplete, even though for them it was a nightmare to forget. The fictional descriptions quintessentially signify that women’s bodies became the crux of communal savagery and despite all these sufferings, women’s subjects in partition history remained unrecognized. The complete story of partition could have been different if the agonizing realities of the women which were embedded in feud and rupture were not obstructed from nation’s report. Universal history is something that equitably examines men, women, and the formation of patriarchy, unlike partition history which has been written predominantly by men while female endeavor has been constantly forsaken. Though women were being unnoticed in the process of history writing, literature became their rescue and it is through female writers that women’s accounts were unveiled.

Post-colonial women writers gave voices to their female protagonists through which they revealed authentic accounts of the horrified fate they encountered. Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin were some of the post-colonial writers who published their work on several female witnesses’ reports during that period time. “Menon and Bhasin began their project with conversations with women in their own families...throughout Punjab...For the women “remembering was important, but as important was remembering to others, because it seemed to validate their otherwise socially negated experiences.”(Bacchetta, 571) The personal narrative uncovers admissible masculinist sexual abuse against women during the havoc of partition. Menon and Bhasin disclosed the heterosexual violence that was inflicted on women: “female bodies were equated with notions of home, their respective religious “communities”, nations and national territories....positioned as either “ours” or “theirs”....stripping parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding the breasts with triumphant slogans; amputating breasts; knife opening the womb; raping, of course; killing fetuses.”(Bacchetta, 571) Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, mentioned a women’s journal *Manushi*, which was a sort of memoir by a woman named Kamlaben Patel. The account of partition from Kamlaben’s point of view was heart-wrenching: “...in a bid to defile the so-called ‘purity’ of the race, women were forced to have sex with men of the other religion, many were impregnated...many older women had been abducted...take away older women, widows...for their property.”(Butalia, 135) The narrative by female authors contributes with a more distinctive approach to women, for example, Amrita Pritam was a firsthand witness of partition. In her writings, she presents a counter-narrative to the existing predominant historical narrative of partition. Her novella, *Pinjra*, a fictional tale, reflects the cruelty confronted by women during partition and the trials women had to go

through without any fault of their own, which persists in today's era. The histories solely focus on religion, specifically Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, assuming that no other identity persists. These religions were the exclusive priority in the partition's description and hence concealed the narratives of other dimensions. One such dimension is of lower-caste, untouchables, or Dalits. They remained untouchables in these reports as well and their voice in 'traditional' sources of history is hushed: "there is an immediate clamoring of 'voices' that demand to be 'heard', voices that tell of the many histories that lie, still undiscovered..." (Butalia,297) Dalit women are the most disremembered group of partition. They have minimal or no testimonies in the archives, and therefore we presume the partition archives casteless but if truth be told, these marginalized groups, more or less get lost in the chaos of upper-class male-dominated politics of partition.

Since Dalits were considered outcasts, their invisibility extended even in the partition turmoil. Amidst the loot and theft, Dalits somehow managed to escape because 'they had no property to be looted'. In fact, their very caste identity aided them to get away from these disruptions and since they were economically weak, the disruption provided an opportunity to accumulate goods and wealth. The story of Maya Rani, belonging to a lower-caste, in Butalia's novel, where she shared her elation in looting homes of dismissed wealth and even achieved to attain a dowry: "I kept lots of new utensils, hamams, etc, for my wedding. I bought a lot of utensils ...looted many razais, quilts....who's going to take us away, who's going to kill us? We call ourselves Harijans. Hindus, Christians, no one can take us away." (Butalia, 300) Dalits non- vulnerability stemmed from the fact that they were considered extremely low in the society and precisely too detestable to other communities, to be killed in a conflict: "...Identity was fixed : it could become a stick with which you could be beaten, but equally , it could become a stick with which you could use to fight for certain privileges."(Butalia, 327) But it was quite intriguing that despite being from the Dalit community, women couldn't escape sexual abuse. In the most intimate proximity, the notion of untouchability and loathsomeness vanished and the question of lowness didn't emerge.

Violence in partition acted evenly, irrespective of the class and caste differences since it was on a huge scale. The class differences didn't interrupt the sexual abuses against women, though women belonging to the upper class were safe and were more privileged, for example, they escaped by traveling in cars and were escorted most of the time. Lower-class women were devoid of all these liberties and were often the victim of rape and assault. Scheduled castes were not permitted to acquire shelter in the refugee camps and they were forbidden from basic requirements like food and ration. The camps only accepted those coming from Pakistan and were those willing to go there. Dalits were placed nowhere, neither in the camps nor in historical narratives, and the negligible material which focused on their experiences was written by Dalits themselves. "...Dalit women whose voices are equally absent from the archive of Dalit voices...their only collectivity lay in silence."(Butalia,330)

Women are considered submissive since time immemorial. They not only confronted brutality during partition but also after partition. At the time of partition several children were abducted and post-partition, children born out of wedlock of abducted women were considered the epitome of humiliation; even the citizenship of those children was questioned. In fact, in the majority of the cases, women had to turn their back on their children and leave them in refugee camps that lacked fundamental aid. Therefore, the partition made it extremely difficult for these women to process motherhood.

Aggressors of partition fought over property and women but there was no fight over the children. Raped and kidnapped women were 'repurified' and hence they were eligible to enter a specific group of religions but the fate of abducted children was doomed since in them the blood of two religions was

blended and therefore they were not allowed to enter back into the fold of any religion. Adults and older people still vocalized their experiences, unlike the children who didn't have the vocabulary to express their rupture as they were unaware of what exactly is happening, let alone tell others. The destiny of abducted children threw light on the subject of motherhood. India was epitomized as a motherland and the devastation of its (her) body is amalgamated with the ruination of the bodies of Indian women.

The declaration of legitimate motherhood was rejected by the mothers of illegitimate children because fingers were raised on their 'purity' and 'morality'. On one hand, abducted women were allowed to enter back in their community, and contrarily children were separated from them. "Perhaps the greatest irony of all was that it was the State that was now defining something as private as motherhood, with, of course, the tactic support of the community and the family." (Butalia, 278) Of course, the cases varied, some women accepted their children while others abandoned them. Post-abducted children bought with them the complication of legitimacy and illegitimacy whereas the children belonging to widowed women were assisted with advantages from the welfare policies of the State. Lalithambika Antharjanam's short story 'A leaf in Storm', uncovers the torments of motherhood by presenting a pregnant rape survivor, who didn't let her fate shatter her courage, and instead of abandoning the child she embraces him. The path from victimhood was challenging. Not all women were able or allowed to choose their desired path and hence crushed beneath a re-established social authority.

The dark aftermath of Partition has emitted a shadow on the lives of the people who endured the violence, especially in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The survivors of this mayhem were damned since they were unable to forget the ill-fated past. Women were expected to rebuild and restore but the echo of their tragic memories was unceasing. They not only experienced physical wounds but also incorporated psychological strains and their emotional and cerebral sentiments were often shrouded in the partition narratives. The guilt of offenders was automatically evicted because the sorrow of the victims was not confronted. Baher Ibrahim in the essay "Review: The Psychological impact of the partition of India" points, "It is perhaps only in literature and art that 'the silence of complicit majorities, and of subsequently complicit generations, has been faced' (p.207), and the details of Partition violence represented and engaged with."

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