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Broken Identities: The Self in Turmoil during the Partition

Abstract

Partition literature or Partition narrative has become a crucial discourse in the understanding of Indian history ever since the early twentieth century. With the final decision of creating fissures in the Indian subcontinent on the 15th of August 1947, Indian history got marred by cries of political and human agony. Not only did Indian subcontinent attain independence from British rule, it also got divided on the basis of religious differences once the idea of creating a separate all Muslim nation-state came into being. Partition uprooted millions of people and rendered them homeless. The resulting migrations and displacements ruptured their sense of identity which was once fabricated around their nation, motherland, history, trees, rivers, lakes, and cultural traditions and practices. As an outcome, identity crisis changed how a society once felt and thought. It would be crucial to look at the impact of distancing people from their roots on their individual identity.

The works of Anita Inder Singh, Ismat Chughtai, Kamleshwar, and Sa'adat Hasan Manto highlight the trauma of broken identities that left an indelible mark on the society through their characters trapped in the inevitable harrowing conditions of the day.

Keywords: Partition, exodus, migration, turmoil, dispute, muhajir

Partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947 was one of the most traumatic experiences in history. Attainment of Independence from the British rule marred the subcontinent by the agony of Partition as well. 15th August 1947 is remembered as a day when Indian Empire, under the British rule, was divided into two sovereign states- The Dominion of Pakistan and The Union of India. This cataclysmic event led to the distribution of power to these newly divided and independent nation-states. It opened up a space of unprecedented violence that coarsened the relationship among various religious communities, deformed established belief systems, and distorted the vision of a unified India.

This politically motivated event has had terrible consequences since then. Communal disharmony and religious antipathy have become a common pattern of the day. "The vengeance that ordinary Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs wrecked on each other coarsened our social sense, distorted our political judgements and deranged our understanding of moral rightness" (Bhalla vii). With the vision to demarcate and structure religion specific nation-states, a stabilised society was decapitated. Conceiving of the political decision not only changed the geography of Indian subcontinent, but also severed the attitude of a once unified society towards fellow human beings, different religions, and religious communities.

The practitioners of partition have been authoritarian in nature, and have called for the creation of a separate nation-state based on ethnic, cultural, religious, and lingual distinctions.

“Reasons of state and religious, ethnic or cultural division have been inextricably intertwined in creating the situations that led to partition” (Singh 4). The alignment and acquirement of a territory with strong separatist agendas have made Partition a space for ideological dispute.

The labels, like ‘communal’, ‘discord’, and ‘Hindu-Muslim issue’ spread like fire. The communities started to look at themselves quite objectively and as separate entities from their religious counterparts. Thus, communal riots surfaced as ineluctable consequence of the genesis of the division which took place at a national level.

Clearly, the Partition proved to be a well-planned out manoeuvre. Conception of the ‘Divide and Rule’ policy helped the sovereign authority to divide the population into confined sections, and prevent them from the revolt against their rule. It turned out as intended. Thus, the exodus was one of the devastating outcomes of the Partition which disturbed the concept of identity of entire generation. People lost their homes as well as their points of origin and existence. The idea of the ‘self’, which was delineated around the fixed and common pointers of history, remained the same no longer. The social and geographical markers of identity in the form of rivers, landmarks, temples and mosques which were common to a variety of ethnic populace also got fragmented. Announcement of the dictum uprooted many of them and rendered homeless in a way that they could never look back. Memories engulfed in nostalgia alone could bring them solace, if any remained. To separate one from one’s nation, motherland, history, trees, rivers, lakes, and cultural traditions and allot them religious specific markers meant to extract one from their roots, and put them within the schismatic religious turmoil.

The Hindustan-Pakistan Plan was brought out on June 3, 1947 whereby the nation was divided, of which Pakistan was “to comprise the Muslim-majority provinces of Sind, the NorthWest Frontier Provinces (NWFP) and 16 districts of Punjab; the remaining 13 districts of

undivided Punjab were to be a part of India . . . Within a week of Independence, about 11 lakh Hindus and Sikhs had crossed over from west to east Punjab, and in the week following, another 25 lakhs had collected in the refugee camps in west Punjab” (Bhasin and Menon WS-3). As a result of this mass displacement, the pattern of communal harmony got ruptured with irreversible repercussions. Thousands of people migrated from one side of the border to the other. Punjab got divided into East and West Punjab, and entire Sindh went to Pakistan. As a result of which, Sindhi Hindus had no place to call their own when they migrated to India. The Sindhi Hindus moved to nearby places, like Gujarat, Mumbai and Rajasthan. On the contrary, the Sikhs and Punjabis moved to the Indian state of Punjab. Similarly, the Muslims of India got displaced and migrated to the newly carved out all-Islamic sovereign state. Theirs too have been a life long struggle to fit in with the Muslims of

Pakistan. ‘Displaced identity’ was the new psychological quandary that Indian Muslims had to confront in a land where they were told to belong and associate themselves with. ‘*Muhajir*’, migrant, and ‘refugee’ became common terms of association among the natives of Pakistan to be used for all those migrants who decided to settle there after the major historical and geographical alteration in the borders. Evidently, the ‘self’ remained in turmoil as a consequence of the rise of religious prejudice and contempt among both the Hindus and the Muslims.

There has been a prodigious amount of literary works since division which can be categorised as ‘Partition literature’. Representation of the ‘self’ in turmoil through the written works opens a literary space for the ones who were rendered quiet much before and could vent their agony. This space becomes a powerful microcosm of the identity crisis which displaced communities at a larger scale.

In her short story, "Roots", Ismat Chughtai questions the rationale behind the breakdown of affinity between the two communities. She voices reason through the narrator's aged, Ammi. At a point, when her family is packing their belongings to migrate to Pakistan while she opts to stay back, her mind begins to delve into the insoluble conundrum. Questions, such as "What is this strange bird called, our country? Tell me, where is that country? . . . Besides, who knows if you won't be driven, pushed out of there too?" (Chughtai 16) and her simultaneous remarks leave no stone unturned to highlight the underlying absurdity. With adequate irony, she remarks that "this game of destroying an old country and founding a new nation is not very interesting. . . A nation seems to be no better than a shoe! If it becomes a little tight, discard it for a new one!" (Chughtai 16) This game of shifting nations constitutes a psychological dilemma wherein the definition of one's being, essence and existence gets altered to a variegated degree. Lives have to be built anew from the scratch after having been uprooted and displaced. Through the aged, Ammi, Chughtai brings forth a perspective which none of Ammi's children or grandchildren could see. Eventually, these were the people who were never truly accepted by the Muslims of Pakistan. As Ammi envisioned, they were called 'muhajir' in reality and asked to settle somewhere else. Neither they belonged to India nor were accepted or welcomed in Pakistan. Communal dissension created fissures within the Muslim community and their national identity was rendered uncertain overnight.

Sa'adat Hasan Manto's short story, "The Dog of Tetwal", is equally unnerving. Manto uses satire in an effective manner to underline the futility of war. Not only the Partition led human beings to confront identity crisis, but animals also couldn't be spared from its inevitable tragic repercussions. In the story, the 'dog' needs to identify itself as either Indian or Pakistani. The absurdity of Partition as a narrative of dislocation and exile is that it tries to justify the killing of animals as well. One of the soldiers asks the dog to show him its identification in order

to avoid getting killed. To another soldier's remark, "Now, even dogs will have to be either Hindustani or Pakistani", he says, "Like the Pakistanis, Pakistani dogs too will be shot" (Manto 192). Towards the end of the story, the dog gets shot at and killed due to its inability to identify itself as either of the two. Through the killing of an innocent animal, Manto questions the laying down of arbitrary borders which focus mainly on demarcating and restricting human beings into watertight compartments of superficial national identities.

Through the anxiety and dilemma of Bishen Singh, Manto hints at actual meaninglessness of the practice of Partition in his short story, "Toba Tek Singh". In the story, the Partition is seen through the prism of madness. All the lunatics, in the story, voice reason and mock the absurd manner of vivisectioning the nation into two parts, "Who knew whether Lahore, which was now in Pakistan, would not go over to Hindustan the following day, or the whole of Hindustan would not turn into Pakistan? And who could say with certainty that someday, both Hindustan and Pakistan would not vanish from the face of the earth altogether!" (Manto 216)

By using a 'mad' protagonist, as the face of reason, Manto fabricates a space which reflects the trauma of Partition on a microscopic level. Bishen Singh is an example rather than a representative of common man whose life has been affected by the power politics. He shouts and falls like other powerless man. At the same time, his shout renders the scheme of the two newly born nations voiceless and powerless. Bishen Singh epitomizes a common man trapped in a claustrophobic environment. He is helpless and has no option, other than to go insane with worry. One of the remarkable features of the story is that Singh is aware of the concept of home and every man's need to belong to it. A home defines an individual, gives him an identity and provides solidity to that identity. It is when this firm base of identity is snatched away, rational men, living together harmoniously at a place, become no less than mad men occupying mental

asylums. The arbitrary manner of arranging the nations plays with humanity in a way that dementia seems to be the only logical and sane outcome.

In his Hindi novel, *Kitne Pakistan* (2000), Kamleshwar goes a step further to unveil flustering ideology behind the exercise of Partition. Firstly, the title of the novel circumscribes a variety of meanings within itself. It can be read in multiple ways in the context of the novel. The first thing that one notices about the title is that it does not consist of any punctuation marks. Therefore, the title expresses bewilderment at the mindless division, interrogates the rulers of political parties, and expresses huge amount of grief and anger at the situation of the world today. Kamleshwar provides a historical account of bloodshed and violence in this novel. When one begins to read the novel, one finds oneself in a state of trauma and phobia. The huge canvas of annihilation, painted by Kamleshwar, seems boundless. He paints the telling images as speaking of their horror. The reader wanders with the characters in search of an answer to a simple question, i.e. 'when will this end?'. Clearly, the term 'Pakistan' is used as a metaphor for a newly amputated land and 'Kitne' adds to its plurality. Thus, he is looking at the division in a broader perspective. 'Pakistan' also becomes a metaphor for the universal human suffering as a consequence of many partitions.

Kamleshwar explores the latent layers of the Partition, both physical and mental, which surface in a manner that has an inexorable long-lasting impact. Physically, the brutality takes the form of massacre and mentally, the Partition creates a space which restricts the entry of different ideologies, other than one's own. In one of the instances, Kamleshwar highlights vagueness of the Partition when a Sikh man is murdered because he couldn't deliver the demand to synchronize his watch with Pakistani time.

"I was told to change the time of my clock... to shift its needles back to Pakistani

time.” (trans., Kamleshwar, 65)

The fact that post Partition Time too has to be identified as either Indian or Pakistani is loathsome. Time is neither Hindu nor Muslim. Through such examples, it becomes clear that religion is merely a social construct. Man devised it to secure his sense of being and existence.

But, consequently, what makes the Partition more nightmarishly religious are man’s futile and selfish aspirations to gain as much power as possible irrespective of who gets succumbed on the way towards its attainment.

“Their selfish ambitions have made them more Hindu or Muslim.” (trans.,

Kamleshwar, 218)

Using such instances, Kamleshwar offers a powerful indictment of the Partition which authenticates the mindlessness it constitutes.

The subliminal trauma that major historical and geographical shift elicited within society ruptured identities. Concept of the ‘self’ got sabotaged to an extent that individuals were left with no option but to wobble between the newly fissured religious dichotomies. Society, on the whole, and individuals, in particular, needed to first relocate themselves in a new context, adapt themselves to and reconstruct their selves around new geographical and social markers of identities. Be it men, women or children, the Partition not just severed the foundations of various communities at large, they were destabilised to an irreversible degree.

The arbitrary markers like ‘muhajir’ or refugee validated man’s condition as a lunatic struggling to survive the “unstable” exile within the framework of the “stable” world.

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