

WOMEN'S VOICES THROUGH THE SHATTERED BORDERS: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF BRITISH INDIA'S PARTITION ON FEMALE NARRATIVES

Ms. Harshita Nogia

Research Scholar

Department of History

School of Humanities & Social Sciences

University of Technology, Jaipur, Rajasthan

Prof. (Dr.) Sunil Kumar Chaturvedi

Professor

Department of History

School of Humanities & Social Sciences

University of Technology, Jaipur, Rajasthan

Abstract

This paper looks into the changes in themes and style in women writers of India at pre-partition and post-partition stages. Social reforms, cultural practices, fight for freedom, these were all the entire themes before the partition, where great writes like Sarojini Naidu and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain were demanding women's rights and education. After the Partition the Indian writing turned slightly to the theme of individual loss, trauma and survival that was evidenced by the psychological impact of the event. And this period brought out writers like Ismat Chughtai and Khadija Mastur articulating the fragmented existences of women in the newly formed nations. Crucially, creative writers' accounts of the partition are contextualized in the disturbing place that female writers of Partition who published Writings, Amrita Pritam, Ismat Chughtai and Khadija Mastur have given important perspectives of the gendered nature of the partition. Realistic frameworks, an individual's interior world describe through stream of consciousness or fragmented narratives, memoir and autobiography were used to depict the traumatic consequences of Partition. Irony, metaphors and substandard/simple amalgamated with standard English language expanded these accounts adding to the trauma faced by women during and after Partition. In general, this research establishes the transition from general socio-political concerns to individual account in the women's writings to further explain the gendered aspects of Partition.

Keywords: *Women's literature, Partition, social reforms, trauma, personal loss, survival, psychological impact, realism, stream of consciousness, fragmented narratives, memoirs, autobiographies, symbolism, vernacular language.*

1 Introduction

The event commonly known as the Partition of British India in 1947 is one of the most important yet painful occurrences in the history of South Asian region as it signified the

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exit of British colonial masters and birth of two new nations, India and Pakistan. This division entailed the highest levels of violence, forced migration, social destabilization, etc. Millions of people were displaced, resulting to one of the biggest movements of people in history due to the borders that were drawn (Talbot & Singh, 2009). The civil unrest, kidnapping, and violence against women that happened during the Partition are still fresh in the minds of the people of the subcontinent.

Thus, Partition's importance is not only in the political and social consequences of the event but also in the cultural and literary effects it had in the subsequent years. It has been described and explained by historians, but its impact on the literary works and especially on female characters' writing, shows the psychological and personal consequences of this great event. In literature, women who were among the most vulnerable during the changes of the period spoke out for themselves and represented trauma, displacement, and survival. Female authors' narratives offer quite a different view of the human face of Partition and how gender, violence and survival intersect (Butalia, 1998).

This paper seeks to analyze the effects of the British India Partition in the women's literature with a focus on how women have represented this event. This research aims at identifying the changes in the thematic and stylistic concerns that the event of Partition brought about in women's writing by analyzing the works of the most famous female authors. The task is to investigate how Partition has influenced the creation of female character and her power in literary works and how these narratives relate to the debate on collective memory and trauma.

This paper is divided into several sections to ensure that the effects of the Partition on the women's literature are examined thoroughly. The second part offers a more elaborate historic account of the partition of British India and focuses on the social-political scenario of that time along with the policy's effects on women. The third part provides a thematic discussion of the women's literature written after the Partition of India, focusing on the thematic elements like trauma, displacement, and the construction of identity. The fourth and the final part focuses on the role of female writers and the literary devices used by them to represent the Partition. The fifth section looks into the aspects of the narratives of Partition with relation to class, religious, and social standing alongside gender. The sixth section, therefore, focuses on the effects of partition on women's identity and their voice with reference to some of the stories of resistance. Last but not the least, the paper concludes with the discussion of major findings and some thoughts on the lingering effects of Partition on women's literature and possible directions for the research.

2 Historical Context of British India's Partition

The Partition of British India in 1947 was a disastrous climax to nearly two hundred years of British colonial domination on the Indian sub-continent. The process, carried out in a rather hurried manner, culminated in the partition of British India into two dominions, India and Pakistan. This process was codified through the Indian Independence Act of 1947 which was enacted by the British Parliament provided full sovereign status to the new nations from August 15, 1947 (Khan, 2007). The boundary demarcation which is called the Radcliffe Line was overseen by Sir Cyril Radcliffe who was a British lawyer with no experience in India and who was given only five weeks to draw the line (Zamindar, 2007). This hurried and unplanned partitioning resulted in the demographic upheavals and often displacement through violence; about 10 to 15 million crossed borders to opt for the chosen nation (Talbot & Singh, 2009).

The political situation during the time of Partition was characterized by riots, political turmoil, and migration of people. Drawing of the Radcliffe Line divided Punjab and Bengal two provinces with Hindu, Muslim and Sikh populations where the draw of the line put people on the 'wrong' side of the border leading to violence (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). The extent of violence was most severe in Punjab where many villages were wiped out and large-scale killings took place. Scholars have estimated that between 200,000 and two million people died during this period (Butalia, 1998).

The period following Partition was characterized by the displacement of millions of people, the formation of administrations in India and Pakistan, and the management of religious conflicts. The Indian case of Congress led government was for nation building to transform separate state entities into a single unified country. On the other hand, Pakistan under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah had the task of determining the nation's identity of a newly formed state for Muslims which was created out of India (Talbot & Singh, 2009). There were population exchanges where Muslims shifted to Pakistan and Hindus/Sikhs shifted to India changing the religious/ethnic demography of the areas.

Different social groups were affected differently by the phenomenon of Partition and it must be stated that women suffered most. Many women became victims of the violence in the communal riots that followed and were taken, raped, and converted. According to official figures, it is believed that about seventy-five thousand women were kidnapped during the Partition (Butalia, 1998). The violence against women thus became a means of expressing dominance and power over the women, thus making them more vulnerable in the existing patriarchal society.

Thus, in addition to the trauma of Partition, many women were faced with the experience of displacement. They lost their homes, families, friends and other familiar social structures; this made them feel strangers in their own land. The women who found themselves living in the refugee camps and resettlement colonies had to adjust to new social relations while many of them were psychologically traumatized by the experiences.

Thus, the stories of these women, whose voices are often absent or erased in dominant historiography, were articulated in literature. Thus, female authors employed their writings to narrate and cope with the traumatic events of Partition, giving a face to the faceless. Some of the literary works include the poem *Ajj Akhaan Waris Shah Nu* by Amrita Pritam and the short stories of Ismat Chughtai which depicts the sufferings of women during the partition of India and Pakistan (Pritam, 1990; Chughtai, 1994).

Hence, the Partition of British India can be considered as a historical turning point that significantly changed the social and political realities of the South Asian region and brought long-term consequences in the demographic relations of the area. An important aspect is that women suffered from severe trauma and displacement, which affected their writing and offered new perspectives on the gendered aspects of history.

3 Thematic Analysis of Women's Literature Post-Partition

The themes in the women's literature differed immensely from the theme before the partition period to the theme after the partition period which shows the effect of this event on women's literature. The women of India have been writing and expressing themselves from pre-Partition times, themes of social reforms, cultural values, and freedom movement were common among them. They included the role of women, education, and struggle against colonialism. Sarojini Naidu and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain mainly focused on the issues of women's rights and education for women (Naidu, 1912; Hossain, 1905). Such works traditionally underlined socio-political processes of a particular period, which is reflected in the desire of the nation for freedom and equality.

But, the literature written after the Partition of India and Pakistan paid more emphasis on the direct and individual effects of the Partition. They were now mainly oriented to such concepts as grief, suffering, and the fight for existence. The violence of Partition and the refugee issue and the changing of the identity became the dominant themes. There is an introspective focus on the impact of the Partition on the protagonists' mental and emotional states. New realities of women in the newly formed nations started to be depicted by authors such as Ismat Chughtai and Khadija Mastur (Chughtai, 1994; Mastur, 1998). This change from the large socio-political issues to the domestic, personal was a revolution in women's writing and exposed the wounds of Partition on the individual.

Some of the most renowned female authors of the Partition period employed their literature to reveal the sexual politics of this event. Among the many writers that have contributed to Partition literature, Amrita Pritam is one of the most famous. Her poem ‘Ajj Akhaan Waris Shah Nu’ (Today I Invoke Waris Shah) is about the pains of the partition. Pritam’s novels like *Pinjar* (The Skeleton) explores the experiences of women who were abducted and forced to convert to another religion and their fight against the odds, their struggle of identity crisis (Pritam, 1990). Ismat Chughtai’s works like *Lihaf* (The Quilt) were about the suppressed and the forbidden aspects of the women’s sphere. In the light of Partition, her stories like “Roots” deal with the refugee’s psychological and physical displacement that the partition entails. Chughtai’s stories are characterized by the portrayal of women’s sexuality and their social and political oppression, which gives a complex understanding of their situation during the period of the Partition (Chughtai, 1994). Khadija Mastur’s novel *Aangan* (The Women’s Courtyard) describes the process of a Muslim family’s breakdown against the background of the Partition. It also explores the political changes and their relevance to the women’s personal spheres, portraying the spirits’ strength and women’s ability to endure the worst. Mastur’s work is also characterized by political and private spheres (Mastur, 1998).

The novels written about the Partition of British India use various literary devices to depict the vulnerability and the physical turmoil that was witnessed during this period. These techniques have been employed by female authors especially to narrate the stories that are peculiar to the female gender and most of which are usually sidelined. One of the most common trends is realism, which was used by many women writers to portray the realities of partition. This way, they managed to tell the raw and plain stories which described the violent, destructive, and tragic aspects of the conflict. For instance, the novel by Khadija Mastur named *Aangan* (The Women’s Courtyard) that is written in the realistic tradition and offers the reader a detailed description of the gradual degradation of the family and political unrest with the focus on the women’s daily battle (Mastur, 1998). The other method, free indirect discourse, enables the reader to penetrate the psychological processes of the characters and observe how they react to Partition’s turmoil. The use of stream of consciousness enables writers such as Ismat Chughtai to explore the psychological aspects of the female protagonists’ lives such as identity crises, fear, and confusion. This method helps to reflect the circumstances of the time – fragmented and full of turmoil (Chughtai, 1994).

Broken narratives are also another tool used in the novels as the lives of the people affected by the partition are also broken. This technique is used to show the non-linear time and multiple angles of the events to express the confusion and disorientation of a person. It is due to this reason that authors like Bapsi Sidhwa in *Cracking India* employ a

fragmented style of writing to show how the two histories are intertwined, and how Partition affected people in different ways (Sidhwa, 1991). Autobiographies and memoirs have a significant role to depict women's perspective of the partition as they give the firsthand accounts of the real-life experiences of women during the partition period. Personal narratives enable an author to tell a story of themselves or someone else in a very believable manner. Another example of postcolonial historiography, Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* is a collection of oral histories and personal narratives of women who were victims of trauma; this way, the women are given a voice to tell their stories (Butalia, 1998). Fictional narratives on the other hand offer the author the freedom to paint the psychological and emotional geography of the partition. Thus, the characters and the plot of the work enable a writer to explore the themes of identity, trauma, and people's ability to recover. Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* (*The Skeleton*) depicts the plight of a Hindu woman who was kidnapped during the partition of India and Pakistan and, through the framework of fiction, examines the issues of confinement and liberation as well as the clashes between cultures (Pritam, 1990).

This paper examines how symbolism is employed in women's Partition literature to convey hidden messages and subtext. For instance, in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*, the skeletal figure represents the physical obliteration of women who suffered during the Partition, but also their survival (Pritam 1990). Use of imagery assists to make the scenes of Partition more real and hence the experiences easier for readers to relate to. Authors like Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon use graphic and poignant imagery in their work *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* to show the turmoil and disorder, and also the tenderness and camaraderie between women during that time (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). Thus, the language used in the Partition literature has been described as a combination of colloquial and formal styles as a result of the multilingual nature of the subcontinent. This blend makes the stories more realistic and contributes to the representation of the culture of the historical time. For example, Ismat Chughtai uses regional languages and slangs which adds a taste of reality and makes the characters and their experiences come alive (Chughtai, 1994).

Therefore, the literary techniques and narrative styles in women's Partition literature are significant to grasp the diverse and individual facets of this history. Thus, the realistic, the stream of consciousness, and the fragmented narratives, alongside the employment of memoirs, autobiographies, and fictional narratives, have enabled women writers to express the far-reaching effects of Partition. Thus, the role of symbolism, imagery, and language is to strengthen these narratives as the means of depicting the multifaceted experiences of women during and after Partition.

4 Intersectionality in Partition Narratives

The literature on the partition provides vivid descriptions of gender, class and religious dynamics that defined the lives of women during this chaotic period. The intersectionality approach enables one to capture how these vectors affected the experience of Partition for women in a more sophisticated manner.

This paper established that gender and religion were key factors that influenced the lives of women during Partition. The Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh women were subjected to various types of abuses and forced migration as per their religion. For instance, women from the Hindu and Sikh community would be kidnapped and converted to Islam by Muslim men, and vice versa. This intersectional violence can be described with examples of the two novels: Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (Pritam, 1990) and Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (Singh, 1956), where the main female characters have to question their religious roles and positions during the turbulent period.

Gender also crosscut class to determine the experience of the partition. While both the upper-class women had the same risks of being assaulted and evicted as the lower-class women, they had more access to resources and help than the latter. The hardships of the working class women were worse off because of their position in the social scale as portrayed in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* where Ayah, the servant, is given prominence as the symbol of the suffering of the lower class women (Sidhwa, 1991).

Sexual minorities and women of lower castes and rural areas are the most vulnerable sections of the society that have been portrayed in the Partition literature to focus on their plight. It is evident from the narratives of lower caste women of the Partition that they suffered the double indignity. Women and girls were usually the worst affected and had the least protection or help against violent tendencies. Their narratives are less often narrated, however, they are important to grasp the consequences of Partition. Some of the narratives included in Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* are those of lower caste women who also faced the issues of oppression and domination (Butalia, 1998).

The rural women, who were part of the population displaced by Partition constituted a major part of the affected population but they had different issues from the urban women. Saka's displacement entailed losing not only homes, but a whole way of live, which stemmed from the land. Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon's *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* thus brings out the experiences of the rural women who had to struggle in the process of displacement in a situation where their status and work was defined by their relation with the rural terrain (Menon & Bhasin, 1998).

Comparing the experiences of women living in different intersectionalities shows that Partition affected women's lives in diverse and complex ways. The urban women although experiencing violence and eviction had a better chance of accessing resources and networks that could help. Rural women on the other hand were more lonely and did not have many assets to turn to as was the case with the urban women hence their displacement was more disastrous. This is brought out by comparing Lenny in *Cracking India*, who is a middle class urban woman to the rural women in *Borders & Boundaries* who have much harder struggles due to their seclusion and poverty (Sidhwa, 1991; Menon & Bhasin, 1998).

Religion and class also play a role in the lives of women during the partition process as well as the experiences that they underwent. For instance, a Muslim woman with financial capital might endure religious oppression as a Muslim woman but she can afford to pay someone to protect her, while a Hindu woman of low class might end up being helpless. The comparative analysis of these experiences can be seen in the different representations of characters in the different stories. Suffering religious as well as gendered violence, Puro, a Hindu woman in *Pinjar* is paralleled by the Muslim and Sikh women in *Train to Pakistan* who undergo different but no less traumatic experiences based on their religion (Pritam, 1990; Singh, 1956).

Therefore, the intersectionality in Partition narratives enriches the understanding of history by offering a complex picture of women's experiences during the period. Discussing gender and class as well as religious perspectives and emphasizing the experiences of the most vulnerable women, the literature of Partition provides the variety of perspectives that reveal the complexity and diversity of women's stories. Thus, the intersectional approach is vital for understanding the extent and multifaceted nature of the consequences of the Partition for women.

5 Impact of Partition on Female Identity and Agency

The effects of the Partition of British India on gender and women's identity and power were drastic, as evidenced by the literature of that period. Besides the new geographical borders, which were established through violent displacements and forced migrations, the women were also experiencing a change in their personal and social identities. As a result, literature of this period tends to focus on the processes through which women are trying to regain control over their identities in the midst of the turmoil.

As a result of Partition, women were compelled to face new and sometimes unfriendly conditions and, in the process, were required to reconsider their positions and roles. This process of redefinition is well illustrated in the narratives of women trying to establish their identity within the context of violence, loss and displacement as depicted in literary works.

For instance, in Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar*, the protagonist Puro's transformation from a kidnapped woman to a liberated individual speaks about the fight for identity and freedom in a male-dominated and a socially disturbed society (Pritam, 1990). The change of Puro from a victim to an independent woman who can make her choices is illustrative of the fight for women's independence in the context of social change.

The women's literature being published at the time of partition mainly depicts the strength and defiance of women against all odds. Thus, while violence and oppression dominated women's lives, the latter managed to negotiate their subjugation and assert their agency. This resistance is not always militant but is seen in how women survive in the hostile environment, decide on what to do and empower one another. In *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia brings together many stories of women who, despite the fact that they had suffered terrible violence, were able to stand up. These are true life narratives of women as survivors and their strength to endure the harshest of circumstances (Butalia, 1998). Likewise, in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, the character of Nooran also depicts the theme of survival whereby the subject struggles with the ordeals of partition while preserving her individuality (Singh, 1956).

In the narratives of the Post-Partition literature, the theme of growth of the female characters is depicted as they transform with changed circumstances. In these characters, the writer often depicts profound transformations, which represent the transformation of the society and the new status of women in the post-Partition phase. In Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, the character Ayah, transforms from a loving caretaker to a figure of suffering and strength, which is a metaphor for women of Partition (Sidhwa, 1991). This evolution shows how women's roles and identities changed in the wake of the new socio-political reality.

However, selfhood of female characters is portrayed in Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* also where the main female protagonist Puro transforms herself from an abducted girl to a woman who chooses her fate in spite of the society. This evolution points to two important themes of the post-Partition women's literature namely survival and agency (Pritam, 1990). Moreover, the sociological aspect of the phenomenon and the changes that women undergo during and after the Partition are illustrated in Ismat Chughtai's works. Chughtai's characters frequently violate the gender roles and relationships, which is typical for the post-Partition India questioning the norms (Chughtai, 1994).

Therefore, the theme of the change in female identity and agency in the wake of Partition is predominant in women's writings of the period. The female authors have portrayed the loss of identity and control over women's lives due to the Partition, strength and defiance of women and the transformation of the female characters in light of the new circumstances. In addition to chronicling the history of women's lives during Partition, this

body of literature continues to offer valuable insights into the subjects of gender, identity, and agency in the wake of a disaster of this magnitude.

6 Conclusion

Thus, the analysis of British India's Partition and its reflection in women's literature unveils several important themes and insights. The Partition caused the female subjectivity to be disturbed and transformed in new hostile terrains, and hence, a reinvention of their roles and identities. This redefinition is portrayed in the books like Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* where the main character has been abducted and her quest for freedom symbolizes the fight for individuality and independence in the society dominated by men (Pritam, 1990).

There are examples of women's endurance and rebellion in literature of this time. Nevertheless, the social setting was characterized by violence and oppression of women, but the latter did not surrender to this reality. Through the female characters in Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* and Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* the oppression of women is evident but the women show strength and the ability to survive even under the most adverse conditions (Butalia, 1998; Singh, 1956).

The characters' transformation in the Post-Partition narratives show the change in the female characters as they transition to new roles. As for the characters in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, and Ismat Chughtai's writings, they grow as characters, and so does the status of women in the post-Partition society (Sidhwa, 1991; Chughtai, 1994).

The event of Partition of British India has remained an influential element in the women's literature and as a result, has offered a wide range of narratives that speak about the issues of identity, strength and change. These are not just history; these stories are still relevant, explaining the fight for self-determination of women. This literature has added to the existing body of work on gender and identity and has also underscored the complexity of women's oppression and their agency.

Furthermore, these narratives have been useful in giving a voice to the subordinate women such as the dalit and the rural women who would otherwise not be heard. The inclusion of these voices expands the knowledge about the effects of Partition, contributing to a more diverse and, therefore, more accurate history.

Despite the fact that much work has been done to understand how Partition affected women's literature, there is still much to discover and discuss. Future research could expand on several aspects. Comparing Partition literature of different areas of the Indian subcontinent would have elucidated regional differences in women's experiences and

voices. Future research could include the study of the lives of other oppressed women such as the lower caste women and women from rural areas since the study would have revealed that these women are equally strong and have to endure a lot of hardships in their daily lives.

Studying the psychological and social consequences of Partition on the generations of women that came after and how they are depicted in current literature would provide a better understanding of the effects that this event had in the long run. Thus, it seems that discussing Partition literature and its effects on women would benefit from a more complex methodological framework engaging history, sociology, and gender studies. Further, it would be possible to uncover the effects of other significant geopolitical changes on women's literature all over the world and compare them with the experience of the Partition of India.

Thus, it can be concluded that the Partition of British India has played a significant role in shaping the women's literature and provided the readers with the narratives of identification, survival and change. Further studies in this field will not only enrich the knowledge about this period but also help to expand the discussion on gender, identity, and agency after the geopolitical shifts.

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