



Mapping Trauma, Loss, and Displacement: A Study of Select Indian Partition Narratives

Dr. Yajnaseni Mukherjee, Dr. Raman Malik, Dr. Vinita Soni, Dr. Shashi Shekhar Singh

Amity Institute of English Studies and Research
Amity University, Noida

ABSTRACT:

Partition of India was an event of tragic magnitude which inspired a massive body of literature which portrays the transgenerational trauma, loss and displacement and addresses Cathy Caruth's fundamental question "What do the dying bodies of the past [...] have to do with the living bodies of the present?" (Caruth 26) The poignancy of such literature lies in the portrayal of tragic human aspects of Partition. The social fabric was torn apart, and most authors address and reconstruct the history of this period through lived in experiences. The experience of Partition, displacement and dispossession fostered large scale individual and cultural trauma leaving significant impact on post-memory.

The paper would thus analyze and map the above-mentioned aspects of trauma through several theorists and study of select Indian Partition Narratives. The focus is therefore on cultural memory and how it helps to negotiate the trauma of displacement and loss created through inhuman cruelties perpetrated on communities affected by Partition. There is disillusionment and crisis of values which testify to a distressing and disintegrating period of Partition through the chosen narratives. This paper would thus help us to explore and map this cataclysmic event in the history of twentieth century India and its profound impact on contemporary culture, society, literature, and history as well as the repercussions on future generations too.

KEYWORDS: Partition, Trauma, Loss, Displacement, Narratives

Introduction

The Twentieth Century has been an age of colossal catastrophic events and has witnessed several partitions including the cold war partition of states such as Vietnam, Korea, Germany and has remained a silent testimony to the upheavals caused by the colonial partitions of Ireland, Cyprus, and Palestine. The Indian perspective on an event such as Partition of British India into India and Pakistan sends generations of people into a reverie and the percolation of trauma to the present is a palpable reality. The trauma of watching such a division is an undeniable reality and the social and cultural footprint of the countrymen can be detected in the contemporary literature. The event continues to shape the political and social fabric and weaves a tapestry of pain, angst, and trauma evident in the psychological scarring and fragmented identity of this South Asian nation. The decisions administered by prevailing political powers altered the identity of the nations, embroiling them in a controversy, fostering hostility and alienation and subsequently creating an ambience of irreconcilable trauma. Borders breed a kind of indeterminacy and in betweenness and is integral to the development of identity of the masses of these two neighboring nations whose fortunes have been transformed forever as a repercussion of this major political event -the Partition. The transgression could be felt in the physical distortion of the green land- a significant metaphor of postcolonial literature which was lacerated into red, ugly wounds and the disfigurements could be expressed through colors and manifested through the trauma, loss, and displacement of the natives from their motherlands. This paper would try to focus on the impact of this historical event on the psyche of the South Asian people



and how the echoes of Partition can still be felt in the articulation of trauma through the collective literary responses to this mammoth life altering event through several contemporary novels and short stories. “*Contemporary communal violence often invokes the trope of Partition*”, writes Urvashi Butalia in Priyamvada Gopal’s *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History and Narration*. (Gopal 92) Trauma, according to Horvitz, has taken various forms: “*over the past one hundred and twenty-five years, three unique forms of trauma have emerged into public consciousness: hysteria in the late Victorian era, combat neurosis following World War I, and violence against women and children in our era*” (Horvitz 12). The term trauma in the context of Freudian theory has been imbued with a psychological connotation. It is a description of a wound inflicted on the mind instead of the body as an outcome of an unanticipated emotional blow. In “On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication”, Breuer and Freud point out “*any experience which calls up distressing affects, such as those of fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain may operate as a trauma of this kind*” (Breuer and Freud 6). Furthermore, in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, Freud opines that “traumatic neurosis” is a type of “repetition of compulsion” (Freud 12) of disagreeable and distressing happenings. Freud defines the notion of psychical realism in which the unreal and reality may concur or can even substitute each other. Thus, society’s encounter with significant traumatic events like the Partition can cause fractured identity, foreignness, displacement, and alienation as a disparate trajectory and conjure up multifarious connotations of understanding of sufferings. Theorists such as Geoffrey Hartman, Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman has spawned interest in the field of trauma studies and helps us to analyze the ramifications of trauma. The Partition of British India thereby is so massively traumatic and devastating that it escapes human understanding as well as linguistic interpretations. Writes Alok Bhalla apropos to the Partition in the ‘Introduction’ to a collection of Partition stories in English “*there is not just a lack of great literature, there is, more seriously, a lack of great history.*” (Bhalla 6)

Trauma thus inevitably becomes a permanent scar in one’s memory and remains a permanent fixture in a person’s psyche and hence any literature that talks about such memories becomes a horrid recollection of painful and agonizing memories which keeps on haunting sporadically an individual or the collective consciousness of nations like India and Pakistan. E. Valentine Daniel says, “*Accounts of violence.....are vulnerable to taking on a prurient form*” (Daniel 21) Therefore the depiction of such barbaric atrocities becomes noteworthy in the context of concocting appropriate means to portray such events as sufferings inherently resists representation. It becomes the revelation of violation, chaos, humiliation, and exploitation which is replete with individual experiences of migration, torture, trauma, violence, and loss. Caruth suggests that “*history is not only the passing on of a crisis but also the passing on of a survival that can only be possessed within a history larger than any single individual or any single generation*” ([19], p. 71). The huge, involuntary, and unprecedented human migration caused communal clashes, massacres, and atrocities on both sides. This unfathomably tragic and momentous event stirred the creative imagination, and many authors captured the contemporary reality in their literary outputs. Fiction during this period focused on individual experiences embellishing vividly the influence of Partition on the lives of ordinary people. This was a period of turbulence which ultimately led to the birth of a new nation. However, there was a dense network of interpersonal relationships which continued to defy the particularities of place and whatever disruptions occupied Partition, the people of both the nations understood the meaning of participation in the context of larger moral communities.

Train To Pakistan: Trauma Through Loss Of Relationships And Violence

Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* is set in a period of disillusionment and the crisis of values uncover a distressing and disintegrating period of Partition. Mobs ruled over the villages, looting, burning, committing arson, abduction, massacre, and even brutally stabbing animals. Judith Herman in her book says that traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. “*They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience*” (Herman 37) Independence brought in its wake one of the bloodiest carnages in the history of India. The novel narrates the history of Partition against the backdrop of a fictional village and records the struggle and violence of Mano Majra. However, after two trains pass into the



Mano Majra village station full of dead bodies, fear grips the entire village. It rudely shakes the faith of the people. The incident of mass cremation eliminates the peaceful and tranquil existence of the people of Mano Majra and prognosticates the evil days that will befall them. We witness a society on the cusp of alteration of relationships and as Judith Herman has rightly pointed out that it breaches sanctity in relationships. The trauma, agony, and torment that millions of people underwent during this period is beautifully captured in the novel. The arrival of the ghost train laden with corpses destroys the ideal isolation of Mano Majra as it gets involved in national demolition. The village is divided into two groups-the Sikhs and the Muslims. The chaos prevails in Mano Majra as the author describes, *"There was complete confusion. People ran hither and thither shouting at the top of their voices"* (144). Despite this situation the villagers decide to protect their Muslim brethren. The Lambarder assures Imam Baksh, *"This is your village as much as ours"* (133). But no one can ignore the irony of fate and the schisms between the Muslims and the Sikhs are ruptured and as the chasm widens one can realize the loss of warmth of relationships and the faith that they reposed in each other's communities.

The fourth section of the novel "Karma" envelops the audience in a metaphysical dilemma. The readers are propelled towards a dramatic and devastating end with Juggut Singh sacrificing his life to save the lives of other Muslims as well as his girlfriend, Nooran. It is an ironic reversal of fate where Juggut Singh sacrifices his life on the altar of Partition and the dacoit Mali becomes a custodian of Muslim properties. The men exercise their free will and try to alter their fortunes by living up to the value system which has been preached by the older generations and despite Partition they try to remain true to their ways of existence and retrieve their lost souls defying their states of bitterness and disturbance. The transition from a state of happiness and stability to that of angst and intolerance trying to combat the sinister and venomous impact of Partition. The indignation and insecurity generated amongst the masses led them to a state of disorientation with reality. Khushwant Singh in the novel *Train to Pakistan* describes the situation in Calcutta as it engulfed the country and severed the connect amongst people.

"The summer before, communal riots precipitated by reports of the proposed division of the country into a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan, had broken out in Calcutta, and within a few months the death toll had mounted to several thousand. Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides killed... both tortured. Both raped. From Calcutta, the riots spread north and east and west to Noakhali in East-Bengal, where Muslims massacred Hindus, to Bihar where Hindus massacred Muslims. Mullahs roamed the Punjab and the Frontier Province with boxes of human skulls said to be those of Muslims killed in Bihar. Hundreds of thousands of Hindus and Sikhs who had lived for centuries on the Northwest Frontier abandoned their homes and fields towards the protection of the predominantly Sikh and Hindu communities in the east... By the summer of 1947, when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was formally announced ten million people-Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs- were in flight. By the time the monsoon broke, almost a million of them were dead, and all of northern India was in arms, in terror or in hiding. The only remaining oases of peace were a scatter of little villages lost in the remote reaches of the frontier. One of these villages was Mano Majra." (1)

Mano Majra remained isolated almost reminding us of Macondo in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Like an oasis in the vast desert of communal violence and riots it remained unaffected from communal tension and stress. However, the agony of Partition can be felt in the communal frenzy which reduces the village to a microcosm of violence, hatred, and conflict. The harmonious ambience and the integration of that concord and commonality into the psyche of the people is ruptured and fragmented and leaves the hapless masses bitter, resentful, and angst-ridden. The ghastly butchering of people, the trains carrying death all become symbols of a phantom of trauma which will corner the people into a world of hurt, dread and apprehension. The furious winds of change and destruction fanned communal hatred and led to the collapse of law and order and testifies to the inhuman drama enacted post Partition. The mass cremation disturbs the placidity of Mano Majra and the novelist describes the scene with poignancy and emotions *"Red tongues of flame leaped into the black sky. A soft breeze began to blow towards the village. It brought the smell of*



burning kerosene, then of wood. And then— a faint acrid smell of searing flesh. The village was stilled in a deathly silence” (88) The confusion created by the mad communal frenzy and the horrifying reality is aptly depicted in the novel. The seed of religious suspicion which had been sown blossoms into a flowering tree of hatred and the bestial activities belie humanity. The swelling of the Sutlej River with dead corpses presents a horrifying sight. Uprooting masses of humanity, generating uncontrollable and irrational behavior, displaying unprecedented acts of violence the novel moves us to fathom the impact of Partition. The mass feels rootless, anxious, helpless, and restless. It is their anxiety and trauma which has been succinctly captured by Khushwant Singh in his novel *Train to Pakistan*.

East West: Trauma Through Migration And Displacement

Sunil Ganguli's *East West* captures the very essence of the trauma caused due to the reality of displacement. The novel begins with Pratap's family embarking on their annual visit to Deoghar. Pratap does not seem to enjoy the journey and remains depressed and when Bablu asks Kanu to tell the reason of his father's melancholia, Kanu explains the situation, "...because we are going the other way..." Bablu needs a clarification and Kanu explains the situation as, "our own place is not in this direction. It used to be over on the other side" (10) The narrator says: "with the death of his father his links with his ancestors were severed, it was as though a growing tree was yanked off its roots. For him the rivers and fields, the sweet breeze, early mornings with a taste of date palm juice...all these were gone forever. He would have to spend the rest of his life in exile, in dark, stuffy tenanted rooms in Calcutta" (19) Pratap Mazumdar still clings to the past and the narrator clarifies a little later that Pratap still identified himself with the East Bengalis and his refugee status is further sanctified by his buying the hilsa fish. He is embroiled in memory and nostalgia, and this does not allow him to accept allegiance to his adopted land. The land of displacement does not inspire in him a sense of belongingness. However, he does not visit his homeland too because he is unsure if he would be able to trace his elusive roots over there. The loss of his roots is painful but the loss of his consolation that his roots are still there somewhere would be difficult for him to digest. The refugee's nation is defined as an imaginary space where they are still negotiating the boundaries of their existence. When Mamun questions Pratap if he would like to visit his home in Brahmanbaria and if he can deny his roots in Malkhanagar, he refuses. Pratap's words echo the feelings of all refugees who have suffered trauma of displacement, "*What is the use?....No Mamun, let me retain the beautiful memory of the house. I don't want to spoil it*" (494) His memory will survive and allow him to negotiate his pain of separation from his homeland and reconcile to his refugee status.

Dominick LaCapra asserts "...loss may itself bear striking witness to the impact of trauma and the post-traumatic, which create a state of disorientation, agitation, or even confusion and may induce a gripping response whose power and force of attraction can be compelling" ("Writing History" 46) Members of a displaced community are bound to experience the erasure of their cultural heritage and simultaneously undergo the process of formation of new cultural identities. This erasure is disturbing as it leads the displaced people to negotiate new norms of religiosity, cultural constructs, language, habits, cuisine, social norms which create in them a sense of loss and rootlessness. Pratap's mother's last wish is to return to her land in Malkhanagar. Pratap remembers how his mother had longed to go back to her home one last time pleading him to take her there. At the last moments of his life Pratap visualizes his return to his homeland, "*He looked on, at the house, exactly the same, the thatched shed of the atchala.... Everything as it used to be...There is mother, I am going to her...He closed his eyes in great contentment*" (705-706) Trying to create a new identity in an alien land is an effort which leads to the fragmentation of their selves and converts them into hyphenated identities. A migration or a displacement result in a fluidity of cultural ethos and norms and Sunil Ganguli's *East West* shows the mass migration of East Bengalis to West Bengal after Partition and a dislocation of culture. Displacement also results in trouble in establishing one's subjective self and identity and their economic plight has also been portrayed with empathy. They look for menial employments to sustain themselves in a foreign land. Pratap is not comfortable travelling in the third class and his limited resources hinder the distribution of gifts during the Durga Puja celebrations. They constantly live in a limbo suspended between remembrances of their homeland and the new experiences of the foreign land. Pratap is reminded of his hometown through the acts of buying a hilsa fish or a hailstorm

triggers a memory, and he is let wallowing in nostalgia. For Pratap his Tollygunge home is merely a temporary abode. He retains and maintains his East Bengali habits and people of his generation strictly adhere to these as a sort of cultural integration and solace. Their language and accent are still a part of their lineage, and they can notice traces of their motherland in particular usages. This gives them a kind of comfort as they cling on to the last vestiges of their culture as they set about reminiscing about the past. The emotional involvement of the first-generation refugees with their homeland is still strong and they cannot let go of their traditions, cultures, customs, and rituals as they try to come to terms with the trauma created because of this overwhelming and pervading sense of loss. To them the loss of their land is a sign of the broken axes of the people. The land stands for dignity, identity, and a mythic association of the mass with their ancestors. The spiritual link to the land cannot be broken and the loss of land for them means a breaking away from their traditional ways of existence. This displacement is not based on a consensus and the opinions of the common people have never been taken into consideration. Negotiating new cultural, social and political realities leave them confounded and they live their lives as refugees trying to embrace the culture of this foreign land.

Various traumas are associated with displacement and migration particularly the trauma of exile. Current sociological literature distinguishes the immigrant from the refugee and states that the immigrants migrate of their own free will and their expectations are of a better future and attractive economic opportunities. Michelle Balaev argues that a thorough study of trauma novels reveal how *“the physical environment offers the opportunity to examine both the personal and cultural histories imbedded in landscapes that define the character’s identity and the meaning of the traumatic experience”* (“Contemporary Approaches” 149) Though the categories related to the trauma of displacement are often disordered and easily conflated, they often reflect an incongruent trajectory and deliver varied ideas and understandings of suffering and trauma. The traumatic events experienced by the refugees may include a variety of emotions including that of seclusion, alienation, discrimination, scarcity, or violence. It also includes the loss of a familiar ambience and getting oneself acclimatized and acculturated into a new host environment. The refugee condition is also characterized by a “double absence” (Hron 289) where “the immigrant subject is both an immigrant and an emigrant, who remains psychically both in the former home and the new host country, as well as in the past and in the present” (Hron 289) Significantly, the subject remains embroiled in the past as well as the present too. This feeling of remaining suspended on the threshold creates an anguish and despair which translates into the trauma in the life of the individual. There is a virtual blurring of the demarcation between time and space and that chaotic state of existence becomes a cause for the generation of trauma. The pain experienced by the refugee thus forces the individual to survive in the ghostly shadow of his former self or completely bestows him with an altogether unrecognizable personality. The pain is not visible as its origin is encrypted deep in the mind and often the subject involved fails to identify, understand, and transform it. It was as if he was suspended “in-between...where time and space became chaotic...a locus of impotence...where little agency, voice or movement is possible” (Hron 290) There is a sense of indeterminacy where the incoherent individual often fails to describe and convey the intensity of his pain, explain the source, or even specify the location of its cause. In most cases the subsequent generations who have not witnessed the actual traumatic event fail to translate it into reality but inordinately bear the repercussions of that trauma.

Conclusion

To conclude we can say that through these two novels the authors Khushwant Singh and Sunil Ganguli explore the impact of the tragic event of Partition on the lives of common people. Millions of refugees were uprooted and dislocated from their homelands. Partition as a traumatic incident ended an abrupt, long, and communal shared history and cultural heritage. The train becomes an icon for the generation of trauma s it brings new of Partition along with bodies of those who tried to cross the borders from each side. *Train to Pakistan* is thus a portrayal of the ghastly horrors that took place at the borders at the time of Partition.

East West serves as an effective portrayal of the displacement and relocation as a repercussion of Partition. Memory is stirred and is depicted through the idea of the lost homeland as ‘bari’ and the



adopted homeland as 'basha'. The concept of the ordered, intelligible, and habitable land is a sharp contrast to their disordered existence in a foreign land whose culture still needs to be absorbed and assimilated. The necessary source of sustenance remains their encounter with the alien turf, and this is examined with poignancy and pathos which makes us empathize with the refugee situation. There is a crisis of identity and the quest for identity becomes a literal as well as metaphorical quest in search of the lost land. The cultural hybridity will help us understand the discourse of displacement as delineated in this novel and will open further possibilities of analysis of the literature of Partition.

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