

Embodied Voice and Violence: Women, Subjective Experience and Agency in the Narratives of Partition

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The primary focus of my research is on the oral narratives of women from the Indian subcontinent who have survived the Partition of India in 1947. This project has multiple objectives, the most important being the acknowledgment of the presence of these women during the momentous events of the Partition. This research project gives an importance to their narratives in an event in history of the subcontinent that has been dominated by the 'official' history or history of those (men) who lead various political parties. Another core objective of this project is to use this research with one that I have already worked on in Pakistan, that is, interviewing women survivors of the Partition.

It became painfully obvious very soon into my project that there would be a severe shortage of time to achieve the goals that had been set for this fellowship. Even though the perceived difficulties had been acknowledged before commencing this research project, primarily my being a Pakistani, the full realization of this obstacle was truly realized once the face-to-face started in earnest. One requires a considerably longer period to allow for a more involved and a detailed contact between the survivors and the interviewer.

In the last decade, more specifically since 1997, the fiftieth anniversary of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, there has been a resurgence of popular as well as academic interest to unfold, disentangle and understand the events, while trying to produce new readings and positions, vis-à-vis both countries' present conditions and the process of remembering (or not forgetting). The Partition, like other national man-made catastrophes, compels the victims, perpetrators of violence and the general community to re-examine their actions and roles in what took place and demands complex answers that require individual and communal soul searching. This crucial event continues to raise questions regarding the moral and ethical dilemmas of mankind as well as the need for a more complex examination of issues such as representation, memory, violence, dis-location and their re-articulation over a passage of time. As time increases the distance between ourselves, our worlds, and the events of Partition, the national tragedy of the Indian subcontinent, many survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators, are no longer alive; only Memory remains, as well as archives and private histories which have not been integrated into the public or national discourse of history. The intensified pursuit of Memory, in its many possible forms, appears to be the ultimate way of relating to that event whose shadow continues to arouse impassioned emotions about that period in the personal and collective consciousness of both countries.

Being fortunate enough to have won the Asian Scholarship Foundation's fellowship gave me a unique opportunity to carry out fieldwork in India. It has to be mentioned that no Pakistani academic had undertaken such a task in the past.

Collective trauma finds outlet in public articulation of a community or a nation, as it seems to remember or forget a painful period in its history. Individual trauma, on the other hand, is most often suffered in silence, and whenever language is used to convey it to others' or even to self time after time, the pain somehow remains submerged, somehow imbedded within the injured self, and language fails to extricate the experience from the depths of the unconscious where it continues to reverberate, poisoning the daily existence of the survivor and thus paving the onset of victimization to the knowledge and burden of indescribable trauma. A binary relationship emerges from the memory of a traumatic event. The person who has been through it is able to feel it, though its raw nature, which continues to haunt the survivor only surfaces when language is deliberately forsaken. On the other hand, as soon as one attempts to articulate, there is an immediate distance as language falls short of communicating it not only to the outside world but also to the inner self. Hence, traumatic memory plays a double-edged game of comprehension and incoherence as far as painful reminiscence is concerned.

The sheer extent of the horror of violence during Partition seems so overwhelming that it seems to have precluded any serious discussion of the historical and literary implications of national and personal discourse surrounding this event. The events of Partition, which arouse so much immediate and potent discussion among all the communities involved are ironically the reasons for the lack of critical work other than the memory of the violence itself. Embedded in each individual narrative is a profound sense of loss, of dis-location and ultimately of violence. Whoever experienced one or more of these emotions considers himself/herself to be a victim, and that, by implication, characterizes individuals or whole 'Other' communities as villains. Such characterization becomes inadequate because the stereotypes are simplistic and comparatively easy to peddle, achieving very little apart from strengthening the mutual distrust and hatred that the Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh communities have for one another. Such generalizations also rule out any necessary attempts to understand the need to divorce the actions of individuals from their religious affiliations. The eventual outcome of collective representation results in creating a forced deviation from holding individuals accountable for their actions as opposed to blaming a particular religious community. Partition and the questions of violence form an indestructible vice-like grip of suspicion and hatred between Muslims on one side and Hindus and Sikhs on the other. Even though these narratives are almost sixty years old, the memories of survivors continue to be haunted by the atrocities that they had witnessed. After carrying out interviews with a number of Indian women, and having worked with Pakistani survivors, one is able to claim with considerable certainty that each community continues to harbor deep and divisive opinions about the 'Others', and it is a position that seems to have hardened with the passage of time.

Another term that describes the events of the Partition is Ethnic Cleansing. It is a process in which one ethnic group expels civilians of other ethnic groups from towns and villages it 'conquers' in order to create ethnically pure enclaves for their own members. The term 'ethnic cleansing' generally entails the systematic and forced removal of members of an ethnic group from their communities to alter or 'purify' the ethnic composition of a region. In the case of the Partition of 1947, the definition stated above can also be applied with a minor difference—instead of ethnic, the 'cleansing' was based on religious identity.

The expression *to clean the territory* is directed against 'enemies', and it is used mostly in the final phase of a conflict in order to take total control of a given territory. This policy can occur and have terrible consequences in all territories with mixed populations, especially in attempts to redefine frontiers and rights over given land-areas as was the case of India in 1947. There is a new logic of conflict that relies on violent actions against an 'enemy's' population on a large scale. Examples of this logic and policy abound today (the extreme case being Rwanda).

Ethnic cleansing has formed the basic core of a number of civil and military conflicts. This practice follows a defined method; first comes the 'terror', in which the dominant community demonstrates to those it wants to rid that there is a constant threat—real and imagined—of physical and psychological violence directed against them. There is an 'appearance' of this policy; long caravans of refugees, desecration and destruction of places of worship, and loss of economic sustenance, are some of the ways in which ethnic cleansing manifests itself on the 'surface.' Ultimately, the final purpose is to ensure— through killing, sexual assaults, kidnapping, destruction, threat and humiliation— that no return is possible.

The massive scale on which violence and mass deportation occur during ethnic cleansing is not something that spontaneously occurred at the eve of Partition. On the contrary, it is a practice that has been used repeatedly, and in most cases, with devastating effectiveness to create places of 'bleak ethnic homogeneity.' Roger Cohen, a journalist who covered the Balkan conflict, cites some of the examples of ethnic cleansing which are public knowledge. However, there are many more instances of such atrocities for which there is no public record. According to Cohen:

Greeks out of Turkey; Turks out of Greece; Serbs out of the Fascist Croatia of 1941 - 1945, Jews out of Hitler's Europe; ethnic Germans out of postwar Czechoslovakia; Palestinians from Occupied territories (Cohen, p. 136).

The brief definitions mentioned above provide useful insights into different approaches to the concept of violence. While it is difficult to isolate a unique definition, it is easier to recognize its numerous manifestations throughout history. In this study, rather than focus on the problematic search for a unique and satisfying definition of the term 'violence,' I will examine specific incidents in which it has been articulated in the context of the survivors' narratives of Partition.

As there were numerous cases of sexual violence towards the women of all communities during Partition, the reasons behind this particular phenomenon will also be explored. Nationalism and communalism were the two most significant ideologies during this period, and both of them placed women at the very heart of their discourses and actions. The women who suffered during this time period were later considered to be social outcasts by their communities and, in a number of cases, by their families. It was because of such treatment of these women victims that it was deemed acceptable for women to kill themselves or to be killed off by their relatives in order to escape being abducted or sexually molested by men from the other communities. The fieldwork that I had undertaken was to develop a better understanding of the motives behind such beliefs and actions directed against women during the times of violence.

As there are not many survivors left from that time, a significant amount of effort needs to be undertaken by individuals as well as the State to record and catalogue their narratives, which can later be included into the national discourse of Partition. Having spent considerable time in the Indian Punjab, I was able to interview women from a variety of social and economic backgrounds. A considerable number of subjects who were interviewed have had very basic formal education and thus belong to a social class that does not exercise enough influence over the national discourse to have its voice included within it. Since this was the first time that most of these 'subjects' had been contacted by an 'outsider', one needed to be very careful and not press unnecessarily about details which might be too personal or painful to recall. When asked, everyone without exception told me that I was the first 'outsider' who had come to talk to them about what they saw and experienced during the Partition of 1947. A number of individuals did not want to talk about their experiences, especially after close to sixty years had passed; others were quite suspicious of my motives in conducting these interviews. However, I was able to talk to a number of people to develop some sense of how Partition's memory had seeped into individual and collective sense of being. Among some of the questions raised and examined in this report concerning issues of memory include: How does memory retain and recall hurtful events in one's life? What are the 'politics' of memory and its articulation? How 'truthful' are the events being described? How is one to view the minor discrepancies? How do stories change when they are told to 'outsiders'? What are the factors that one needs to examine when 'private' stories are discussed in the 'public' domain, and how does the discourse change? Can one draw parallels on the theoretical base used to analyze other personal and collective painful events, events such as the Holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda and the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia? One is also left with questions such as: Are any two violent events ever comparable? Lastly, the most significant questions are those that are concerned with the difficulty involved in capturing the horror of violence in words.

Any attempt to study the Partition of 1947, without primarily understanding how people experienced it becomes a futile exercise. It is through them that one may begin to re-imagine the impact this political event had on the individual and collective psyche of the people of the Indian subcontinent. One has to be cognizant of the fact that differences will surely emerge to reveal the complexity of this momentous event.

The severe undermining of a sense of normalcy characterizes the survivor as the psychological after-effects manifest themselves in ways that both the survivor and those around her are caught in a constant struggle of recollection and forgetting. As women have been socially discouraged to recall or rearticulate their trauma in public, such a pressure acts to inhibit the process of recovery.

A number of survivors that I interviewed often omitted details of brutalities and degradation of the times they had lived through. However, in the presence of other survivors, the conversations tended to be more detailed and unequivocal. Theirs were stories of lived experience of overwhelming fear, disorientation, exposure to constant humiliations, sickness, starvation and the ever-present threat of death during Partition's troubled times. Many survivors' accounts divulge the sense of personal confusion (following the rupture of an old and an established way of life) loss of identity, and increasing focus on the minutiae of life on the move, a state of alertness to the particular

which alone might contribute to survival. These factors make Oral history an essential component of what might be considered to be a 'record' of an event. Dunaway points out that Orality:

‘... has helped to democratise history, by incorporating diverse perspectives of the non-literate and of groups often excluded from traditional historical canon.... oral materials are subject to the same problems of validation as any source used for research or writing’ (Dunaway, p.40).

The violence witnessed by subjects was such that it seems to have left an indelible mark on those who were unfortunate enough to have lived through it. There continues to be a general sense of complete incomprehensibility at what was happening around them. To some people, Partition’s violence was a sign of an ‘unnatural’ time, others considered it to be some kind of a Divine punishment and yet others justified it as something that was preordained. Dipesh Chakrabarty, who has worked extensively on the Bengali Partition, has articulated the complexities involved in re-covering the details of victims' experiences:

Memory is a complex phenomenon that reaches out to far beyond what normally constitutes a historian’s archives, for memory is much more than what the mind can remember or what objects can help us document about the past. It is also about what we do not always consciously know that we remember until something actually, as the saying goes, jogs our memory. And there remains the question, so much discussed these days in the literature on the Indian partition, of what people do not even wish to remember, the forgetting that comes to our aid in dealing with pain and unpleasantness in life. Memory, then, is far more complicated than what historians can recover and it poses ethical challenges to the investigator-historian who approaches the past with one injunction: tell me all (Chakrabarty, p.2143).

The academics’ research techniques, as Chakrabarty points out, fail to comprehend or indeed acknowledge the difficulties faced by the survivors. The stories, survivors are told, would perform the miracle of helping them to come to terms with their traumatic past. By so doing, the researchers take on the added role of a psychoanalyst, something for which they are ill-qualified. In addition to this unwelcomed responsibility, I also had to convince the subjects that their stories did matter and it was important, not just for them but for the whole nation, that they were told. Their narratives followed a variety of structures, some gave a detailed account, others were very circumspect and did not really want to talk about the experiences of their past, and if they did talk about the events they been through during Partition, it was repeatedly articulated in a summarised version. Almost all the people interviewed became physically emotional at one point or another.

‘Violence’ was defined by each subject as an act carried out by the members of the ‘Other’ community whereas the brutalities they might have witnessed or participated in were relegated to ‘revenge’ for the barbarity practiced by the Muslims in West Punjab and other parts of what was in the process of becoming Pakistan. Most of the people interviewed believed that most of the vicious acts of violence occurred in the ‘public space’ outside their immediate community, thus establishing an immediate distance between themselves and the mayhem. Almost all of those who knew about

such actions were quick to point out that acts of brutality carried out by their peers could not be really considered as acts of 'violence' [which is thought to be always carried out by the Muslims (or the 'Other')] and the acts always took place outside the sanctity of the community. In a few cases where the interviewees did talk about the physical violence in their villages, I was told that it was mostly carried out by the *Jathas* from other villages or by some 'wayward' members of their own community. The subjects interviewed were able to talk about the physical and quite often horrific acts of brutality towards others, but not a single individual could 'remember' anything about sexual violence (especially rape, which, according to official figures, there were tens of thousands cases.) This brutal and almost essential part of the communal violence seems to have been erased from individual and community's memory, especially when the events of Partition are articulated in public.

The sheer number of refugees that Partition had created was more than any of the people interviewed had ever seen. There were almost no governmental agencies to provide aid and so these people who had been uprooted from their homes and communities had to fend for themselves in their new homelands. As more and more people crossed into the Indian Punjab, it became obvious that it was just not possible or safe for Muslims to live in East Punjab. As the troubles escalated so did the fleeing, this in turn added to the general level of confusion on both sides, which ultimately resulted in more violence.

The violence between the Punjabis was a larger than life phenomenon; one came across several examples of the attitudes and behaviours that seem to have been socially sanctioned during the violent orgy of Partition in this very proud, headstrong, militant and comparatively prosperous region of colonial North India. A man was expected to exercise 'control' over his wife and expected to keep her in 'place' in and out of the household, a liberty which included tacit approval of physical violence against his spouse. Such a disposition, when placed alongside the volatile conditions of the Partition was to have devastating results for all the communities involved in venting out their anger and hatred which had been fanned by inflated claims of real and imagined atrocities of the 'Others.' As a result, one has to agree with a number of issues that Andrew Major raises, despite his tendency to generalise and exaggerate his point about the whole of Punjabi community:

Yet it would seem to be quite wrong to regard the rape and abduction of Punjabi women in 1947 as a product of anomie of the times, as an abnormal occurrence in a society undergoing severe temporary dislocation, for that would ignore the fact that violence against women is embedded in everyday relationships in this society. Recent studies have confirmed that 'power rape' – the raping of women in order to demoralise and defeat rival men in a patriarchal society – is particularly common in Northern India. Abduction is also conspicuous in the history of inter-clan rivalry in the Punjab: speaking of the turbulent Jat villages near the India-Pakistan border, a former Chief Justice [G.D. Khosla] asserted that 'thefts, dacoities, murders and abductions have always constituted the normal spare-time activities of the inhabitants'. Referring to one Jat Sikh villager's raping of many Muslim refugee women in 1947, the same author writes that the rapist 'was not impelled by anger or a desire for revenge. For him it was a God-given occasion to do something he heartily enjoyed' (Major, pp.60-61).

As normal and daily activities were brusquely terminated, women who had been 'allocated' private spheres of houses were suddenly and literally thrust into the open. This emotional and physical threat of brutal violence was manifested repeatedly in the narratives of women and men who had to undertake the journey from West to East Punjab. Because women were in a new domain, their incomprehensibility may well be understood, but men still find it hard to come to terms with the fact that they, who had grown up with the beliefs that they could always 'protect' their women, failed, albeit against forbidding odds. These emotions of impotence seem to have been internalised or were manifested in the particularly gruesome acts of these 'refugees' into India, as they took 'revenge' on those (Muslims) who were still in East Punjab and adjoining states.

A number of subjects said that they became much more aware of their surroundings, factors like the sugar cane plantations and the direction of the wind assumed critical importance in order to escape detection. They had to be very vigilant of the water wells, for a number of them had been deliberately poisoned.

The injuries that seemed to crystallize Partition's violence were mostly inflicted on women of 'Other' groups. For it was through their bodies that 'self' and 'Other' were defined as the diametrically opposed notions of differentiation. In this binary opposition however, groups brutalized their own women because they thought that it was the best way of saving their *honor*. The most potent example of this notion manifested itself through the intensity with which women of each group were guarded from the 'Other.' There were numerous occasions in which the interviewees had been eye-witnesses to the savagery inflicted on women from one group by men from another, which included amputation of breasts, mass rape, parading them naked through public and religious places, cutting open pregnant women, and tattooing their bodies with nationalistic and religious slogans. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin explain this particular form of violence and the reasons behind it as actions that would last for much longer than the Partition. According to them:

Marking the breasts and genitalia with symbols like the crescent moon or trident makes permanent the sexual appropriation of the woman, and symbolically extends this violation to future generations who are thus metaphorically stigmatised. Amputating her breasts at once desexualises a woman and negates her as wife and mother; no longer a nurturer (if she survives, that is) she remains a permanently inauspicious figure, almost as undesirable as a barren woman. Sudhir Kakar, in his exploration of how communities fantasise violence, says that sexual mutilation figures prominently: the castration of males and the amputation of breast - "incorporate the (more or less conscious) wish to wipe the enemy off the face of the earth" by eliminating the means of reproduction and nurturing (Menon, 1998, p.44).

This report has attempted to demonstrate the politics and various forms of language and discourse that have been used to remember and re-articulate the trauma of Partition. Oral literature is how most of the population of the subcontinent, remembers the collective ordeal it went through. This form of articulation of memory of Partition has been marginalised for long enough, and has suffered because of the

postcolonial nations' obsession with the colonial version of collecting and articulating a national history, which has always been in a written form. Orality demonstrates the complexities of remembering that cannot be captured in written literature and hence adds a dimension missing from the otherwise linear narrative. These collective voices need to be tapped into in order to create new, hybridised forms of national autobiography. Gyanendra Pandey has pointed out the need for inclusion of a variety of voices, some of which could be construed as offering contradictory perspectives. He posits that:

Ultimately, too, we shall have to return to the question of the language of historical discourse and its ability to represent violence and pain and daily struggle. This refers not only to the vocabulary available to historians, but also the structure of their discourse. How do we structure or frame the histories that we write in order to allow some place for the bodies that carry the marks of these 'everyday' (marginal, not so much lying outside as reworking the consequences of centralised production and representation) occurrences, and thereby often constitute the 'larger' events and processes of History (Pandey, p.221).

Pandey's arguments are very pertinent to the urgent need of the collection of oral narratives of Partition in order for the subcontinent to achieve a realistic understanding of what took place during that time. Historians and other academic scholars need to admit and understand that certain events involve such complexities and contradictions that articulating them might fall outside the realm of the tools they might have at their disposal. It should not be such a difficult step if one acknowledges and appreciates the fact that in many cases, even the victims are unable to either comprehend or explain their traumas.

One of the primary aims of this report was to avoid the rather unsophisticated tendency that State narrative has, which is of generalizing the experience of suffering. Instead, the idea is to give voice to various perspectives that assume the responsibility, and indeed, accountability for those who have experienced specific forms of human pain and are still able and willing to articulate their subjectivity, even when it is most threatened. Individual narratives make connections which are totally ignored by the 'vertical,' 'fact-based' discourse of 'official' history. These stories are rarely as single mindedly simplistic as those employed by the State whose meta-narrative chooses particular leaders, religious ideology or a community to cast as the entity solely responsible for everything that went wrong during Partition.

Women's narratives add a new dimension to the hitherto 'layer' of someone else describing their experiences. These narratives assert first steps, after a period of almost sixty years, to claim their subjectivity, to talk about their loss, how their 'private' domesticity was suddenly shattered by the events taking place in 'public' where they exercised little or no influence. These narratives are examples of how the convergence of individual memories constantly finds ways to overcome State strictures in order to remember, recall and sustain the narrative that fosters a link with the past, which the State constantly attempts to make its own. It was felt that an awakened sense of self-awareness in these survivors, through making their pain public would go a long way in arousing similar feelings in the larger community. The women's sharing of private grief would add a human dimension to the sterile and

reductive version of events that is expected to be accepted by the populace as the only 'authentic' version of what occurred during the Partition.

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