

SHARED CULTURE, FRACTURED IDENTITIES : STORIES OF PARTITION FROM THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

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Abstract

The nation whose identity is delineated by composite culture of various communities exhibits a form of nationalism, which is free of individualized ethnicities and institutions. Termed as cultural nationalism, it is exemplified by the nationalism of pre-partitioned India where diverse communities merged to form a macrocosm of culture. Cultural identity of a person is shaped by his cultural traditions and by language, but it did not include the concept of common ancestry or race. In a wider sense, it is the foundation of creating one's cultural nationality. Did this shared cultural identity among communities help as a fence to dislocation during partition? In prior decades when the division of India and Pakistan was compassed, people were forced to uproot themselves from their life they had known. In this drastic process, some lost their country, some gained, and there are people who became "permanent refugees". Moreover, women's belongingness was (or is) always linked to sexuality, chastity and honor. Their membership to their family or community or country always depended upon the consent of these three during partition era.

*This paper will attempt to explore and inspect the belongingness of women to their land, the fear of dislocation and socio-cultural change, the problem of adopting the new cultural identity in the new achieved entities, creating social memory, psychological and psycho-social problems which occurred in the lives of the women, question of nationalism in women folk in the days of partition keeping in view the story *Roots* by Ismat Chughtai, *Sikka Badal Gaya* by Krishna Sobti and *My Granny* by Popati Hiranandan*

Keywords : *Partition, Dislocation, (Be)longing, Gender*

The world is rife with wars, fragmentation, and division of countries resulting in a large number of refugees, exiles and fugitives in search of home and stability. The recent examples can be seen in Serian, Nigerian and Grecian migrants across the globe. The issue of "belonging" (as pointed out by Ritu Menon in the essay "Belonging: Women and Their Nations") posed a crucial problem in the era of decolonization. However, in the present scenario it has become stereotyped to the extent that it has emerged as an almost clichéd topic for academic discussions.

India is considered as a nation with a rich repository of centuries old shared culture and traditions, that constitute a basic principium of nationalistic conception. Interestingly, the conception of 'India' itself has a colonial origin. Though "the idea of India", as per Anderson a leading Marxist historian and critic,

gradually turned to be the *sin qua non* of anti-colonial thought. The Indian National Congress had a firm belief in the conception of an undivided land and unity in diversity. Historically the *Bharatvarsh* of the *Puranas* was subjected to successive imperial hegemonies. Besides this, there always existed inner conflicts among the sovereignties, which consequently implicate the notion of 'undivided land'. Even if the dominions over India were not static, the subjects with multiple ethnicities adopted and adapted to the continually changing culture, in conjunction with the existing hegemony, generating an intertwined culture.

Axiomatically, the nation whose identity is delineated by composite cultures of various communities, exhibits a form of nationalism which is free of individualized ethnicities and institutions. Termed as cultural nationalism, it is exemplified by the nationalism of pre-partitioned India where diverse communities merged to form a macrocosm of culture. The ethnically homogeneous society consisted of a substantial percentage of the population from multiple ethnic groups, retaining shared cultural beliefs, traditions, and common language, eliminating the uncommon historical characteristics of ancestry and race. The cultural ideals and norms such as political ideologies, recognition of holidays, a specific and unique cuisine, etc, also helped to shape the cultural nationalism of the natives.

The self-styled concept of unified nation was splintered by the sudden sundering of the ancient entity into two nations in 1947 and later into three in 1971 through an act of secession. People were forcibly amputated from their native lands resulting in one of the biggest human migrations in history. Nevertheless, the demarcation of the line of control could not undermine their loyalties towards home and hearth. Ritu Menon highlighted this point saying that "Partition made for realignment of borders and of national and community identities, but not necessarily of loyalties." (p.230). The process of partition saw the emergence of the 'other' on both sides of the border, undermining the fact that the culture of the 'other' was a conglomeration of more than one cultures rooted in nationalism based on shared culture.

The process of decolonization ramified the partition of the subcontinent, psychologically problematizing the idea of nationality and cultural identity to the extent that the identification with land became complicated: the Sindhi community was divided into Hindu Sindhis and Muslim Sindhis. Hindu Sindhis had to leave Sindh, leaving in their wake a broken community, which with time lost its meaning for the Sindhi Muslims too. Nonetheless, the plan to partition the subcontinent was a unequivocal decision that was to be actualized by unwilling Cyril Redcliff. He was given mere five weeks to "divide a province of more than 35 million people, thousands of villages, towns and cities, a unified and integrated system of canals and communication networks, and 16 million Muslims, 15 million Hindus, and 5 million Sikhs, who despite their religious differences, shared a common culture, language and history." (Butalia 83)

The pre-1947 era witnessed Hindus and Muslims living in harmony as neighbours. They related with each other forming familial bonds. Chughtai says in 'Roots' "...in the Mewar Hindus and Muslims had become so intermingled that it was difficult to tell them apart from their names, features or clothes." (Bhalla vol.iii, 9) In an interview recorded by Menon, 'Lucknow Sisters' the cultural equality in pre-partition India, is commented upon: "Relation between Hindus and Muslims here were so good... Women were all kept indoors, in parda, whether Hindu or Muslim, it was the same. The men had the same bad habits, good habits, whether they were the Rai Sahib or Khan Bahadur... This was a society where the bonds were so strong, feeling ran deep, outsiders can never be a part of it." (Menon 238) The elite class were largely unaffected by the religious and national schism that victimized the poor. The privileged, without undergoing

the horrors of the *karvans* and *kafilas*, crossed the border safely, whereas the poor became its casualty. Common people were attached to farms, pastures, and localities with no awareness of the meaning of the newly formed border. In the story 'Roots', Ismat Chughtai underlines the naiveté of the common folk, asserting, "... they had neither the sense nor the ability to understand what the real problem between Pakistan and India was. There was no one who could have explained it to them either." (Bhalla vol.iii,10). The border restrained the movement of the pastoralists and the nomads who were too uninformed to understand the meaning of Hindustan and Pakistan. Kamila in an interview expresses the dilemma experienced, "Somebody had forsaken someone, somewhere. Who, how, and why? Politicians seemed to have all the answers. Had I any? Was I an Indian or....?" (Menon231)

The ever-present ambiguity about 'belonging' in the era of decolonization finds an echo in the condition of an Asian-African character Mr. Majid, in the play *The Undesignated* by Kuldip Sondhi, who mourns, "I was a second-class citizen under the British. Am I going to remain a second-class citizen under the [Black] African as well?" (Sondhi30) The protagonist is not certain about his place and his static identity in African society after decolonization. In the Indian context, the two dominating and authoritarian powers were Nehru and Jinnah whilst Kamila represents the common folk as Mr. Majid does in independent Africa.

Despite the cultural commonalities, people were uprooted and their nationality was at stake because now it had no connection with their place of birth and domicile. Moreover, the land they are told is their own country evoked no sense of attachment with it. The neighbours, whether they were Hindu or Muslim, found themselves unable to consociate with each other. They were caught betwixt and between loyalty for two countries, the one where they physically belong now, and the one where their soul and mind were anchored. Akhtar-uz-zaman-Elias, the author of *Khwabnamah*, a magnum opus of partition in the East Bengal, once visited Kolkata for amputation of one of his legs had mourned the loss of his land, "I've always claimed I've lived with one foot on either side of the border. Now I'm leaving one foot behind on your side for ever – and of course I've made sure it's the bad foot!" (Butalia, *The Shadow of Partition*51) Chughtai also retorted on the enigmatic game of partition and migration in the story 'Roots':

"What is this strange bird called, our country? Tell me, where is that country? This is the land where you were born, which gave birth to you; this is the earth on which you grew up; if this is not your country, how can some distant land where you merely go and settle for a few days become your country? Besides, who knows if you won't be driven, pushed out of there too? Who knows if you won't be told to go and settle in some other place?..... This game of destroying an old country and founding a new nation is not very interesting. There was a time when the Mughals left their own country to establish a new empire here; now we plan to go elsewhere to find a land of our own. A nation seems to be no better than a shoe! If it becomes little tight, discard it for a new one!" (Bhalla vol.iii, 16)

In this radical process of partition, Ritu Menon says, "there were those who gained a nation and those who lost a country – and, as one woman said to us, there were those who became "permanent refugees". (Menon 229). Sindhis and the *Bangalis*, the refugees from East Bengal, had to face and are still coping with the problem of becoming "permanent refugees". This situation is aptly testified by the assertion of Rita Kothari in her essay 'From Conclusion to Beginnings', where she states "..., both the hatred and the

shame seemed more common to the generation that had 'interpreted' Partition through their parents experience" (Butalia, *Partition-The Long Shadow* 34). Interestingly, some people did not forsake their native land and broke up with their families and relatives who left for Pakistan: Amman in the story 'Roots'. Migrants who acquired a new communal and national identity but could not betray their loyalties to the lost land, returned from Pakistan as exemplified by the family members of Amma who returned halfway. There were people who chose fidelity to their land rather than religious community and lived as converts.

Religion was used as a political weapon to help demonize the 'other' and to blindfold the common folk and mislead them. By this stratagem of the political leaders, the two communities started thinking in terms of 'self' and 'other'. Violence superseded non-violence, and manifested itself in widespread mayhem. The massacre happened as a consequence of the drawing of the border based on religion and because of the political ambition of leaders who turned the communities against each other. The paramount reason for partition was political, which was initiated regardless of the shared cultural specifics. Religion, because it is conferred to a person by birth, by the community or by the act of conversion too, played an important role. During partition, imposition or conversion to a particular religion on/of the 'other' is exemplified by men, women, and children who were converted. Interestingly, many converted willingly and chose to reside in their native lands. In the interview by Ritu Menon, Kamila demonstrated that her conversion to Islam was her personal choice, as she wanted to be with her husband who was in Pakistan. She remembered once she had quoted Galsworthy's *The White Monkey* to her husband, "Englishman was surrounded by all these Muslim who said unless you say, "La Ilah..." we'll murder you. So, he said, if it matters so much to you I'll say it, because it matters nothing to me..." (Menon 236). Her perspective is an evidence that religion was a major issue for her. Many conversions were forced but the point is that the conversions happened because of the politicized border demarcating two ethnically identified lands.

The British were in the beneficiary position of the intermediary party, connected with the national leaders and the locals as well. They signify the "Third Space" which Homi K. Bhabha illustrated in *The Location of Culture*: "the intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People." (Bhabha 37) Being outsiders, they gradually established themselves in the history, traditions, and cultures of the subcontinent by reigning for nearly two hundred years. The national leaders emerged from the locals, oiled the British colonial machinery. In this manner, they also played the part of an interstice. Ngugi waThiong'o, in his essay 'Homecoming', accentuated the contrary view that there should have been no room for "fence-sitting" and any kind of interstitial position or in-between position during the decolonization phase of British rule. (Thiong'oi-ix) The position of interstice, gained them lands of their interests by making the natives their scapegoats. The impact of the leaders of Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League can be seen in the changing attitude of ChabbaMiyani and Roopchandji's children who had started writing 'Pakistan Zindabad' and 'Akhand Bharat' in the school wall in the story 'Roots'.

One of the reasons of "the great divided" given by Kamila in an interview was the orthodoxy and discrimination of Hindus towards the Muslims. According to her the Sanatani Hindus were, that time,

converting Muslims and calling this ceremony *Shuddhi*, which means they considered the Muslim *Ashuddh* and *Achut*. She further adds, “It is because of this attitude that Pakistan was created. You treat them like *achut*. Friends are visiting you at home and people are saying, keep their plates separate. Is this way to treat people? Is this human?” (Menon236). Chughtai also points out this discrimination in ‘Roots’, when the wife of the Hindu Doctor warns him, “Don’t eat there. Did you hear what I said?”, when he was going to treat his Muslim friend’s wife. (Bhalla vol.iii, 12), However, the flipside of the experience of Kamila can be seen in the anecdotes of ‘Lucknow sisters’ who affirmed that the relationship of Hindus and Muslims in their area is so close that it was difficult to differentiate between them. They state, “Our Hindu neighbor, she always says when she hears the ‘azaan’ in the morning, then she wakes up. So many people say how much they like the sound of voices in prayer from the masjid... (Menon238). In ‘Roots’ also, a small group of Sevak Sangh and Muslim League had been set up in the houses of the two friends, one is Hindu other is Muslim. Nevertheless, it did not denigrate the love and the friendship of the two families. Albeit the father Gyanchand was dreaming of an alliance between the two families ““My son, Lalu, will marry only Munni,” (Bhalla vol.iii, 12). Harbhajan Singh, who is a retired government servant and a witness of partition, asserts in an interview, “There were no real communal tension in our village and our family was reasonably tolerant in any case. I had good Muslim friends, and remember the name of one of them- Basheer. I remember I was welcome in his household and my parents had no objection to his visiting our household”. (Maini et al. 94). Shaukat Ali Awan, a Pakistani whose father was a policeman in pre-partitioned India, in an interview asserts that “Being in India is like being in one’s second home, those 60 years of separation cannot overshadow the common culture and social heritage-particularly of the Punjabis.” (Maini et al.122)

The crowning example of Hindu Muslim friendship during that era was seen in a village where the majority was of Muslims still the appointed Sarpanch was a Sikh. Interesting to know that after partition, the Sarpanch unfurled the Flag of Pakistan. When the great migration started, “...both sides sympathized with their common fate. They supplied each other with drinking water and other crucial necessities, but more significantly with profound emotional understanding.” (Salim99) These examples depict that human suffering had put humanity to an ultimate test, it did bring out savage instinct in some but it also brought out utmost compassion in others.

Opportunistic attitude of the people also encouraged migration. All the empowered Muslim families left without facing any difficulties for Pakistan. They found respectable jobs and extended properties there, conferred upon them by Jinnah. Other poor Muslims also took partition as an opportunity to acquire land and property. Unemployed young men also left. If they had not left, they would have missed such fortuity. However, in the newly acquired land, they had everything they wanted but they felt rootless. “*Pair nahin tike*” says ‘Lucknow Sisters’. (Menon 240)

In ‘My Granny’, Granny never left nor did Amma in ‘Roots’. Women have deep-rooted memories of their past. They have their memory anchored in the house they first step in as a new bride and when the moment comes when they have to leave the house, they find themselves rootless. This harrowing moment came during partition when women were forced to leave their household. Some years back Ritu Menon put a question “do women have a country?” in her book *No Women’s Land*. The partition post-independence, left women in a dilemma about their belongingness in the socio-religious and national sphere of either

Pakistan, India or Bangladesh. The “community” of women and children suffered the most during partition and the catastrophe that followed besieged the most vulnerable. They plunged to be mere toys of exchange between two states. Women were uprooted twice and victimized thrice: first, by their abduction; second under the recovery program in which, in many cases, they were forcibly recovered against their will; Third and the final most tragic moment came when they were rejected by their original families. When states were celebrating their freedom, women were at the flipside of the coin. They did not get independence in any sense though they were chaotically partitioned in a designed machination by the “deep comradeship of men”, irrespective of which community the men belonged. Where a woman belongs is always linked to her sexuality, honor, chastity and her acceptability, membership and legitimacy is always decided by the community and state, which is no doubt patriarchal in perpetuum. The “intensely ‘private sphere’ of women’s sexuality was deployed in this major re-drawing of the public borders and boundaries” (*Bagchi and Dasgupta* 5). The body of women was treated as territory to be owned and was inscribed with *Hindustan Zindabaad* and *Pakistan Zindabaad*. The nation Bharat or Hindustan has always been imagined in feminine term as Bharatmata or even Mother India and partition was seen as a violation of her body. What is more, during this carnage, the territory of India was portrayed as a woman and “Nehru cutting off one arm which represented Pakistan is a powerful and graphic reminder of this.” (Butalia189). Since, in order to trespass the honour of the ‘other’, women were raped and killed. The representation of “women as nation” or “nation as mother” delineated the bodies of women as privileged sites where the political plans of both the countries were engraved atrociously.

The encroaching of the honour of the “other” women was an actualization of these above-mentioned phrases. Perhaps knowing these consequences, Amma did not agree to leave her house in ‘Roots’. The house was the life force, the integrated memory of her past and in a way a nation itself to her, so it was impossible for her to cut off that life force and that memory from her body or herself from her nation. If she had done this, she would have died or would have found herself a slave in the household of another community’s man. Popati Hianandani inked a melody from a Sindhi folktale in her autobiographic short narrative ‘My Granny’, which rightly depicts the agony of the abducted and molested women and the land:

*“Umar the king abducted Maruee
The poor girl from the village,
He looted the shepherds
And took away the beauty of the village,
It was fated that Maruee should suffer
The torture of the king’s prison,
Umar was an excuse-
Oh, a mere excuse for the gods.”*

(Bhalla vol.iv,172)

Due to the fear of the ‘fate’ of the girls, Granny’s family decided to send her grown up granddaughter Popati in India immediately. Granny mourned the loss of her (Popati’s) birthplace and anxiously searched for the dust of her native land to give her because she thinks “.....even a corps needs to be buried in the same dust from which it has grown.” (Bhalla vol.iv, 173) Popati compared Mauree to Sita, who was also been abducted by Ravan. Popati wants to say that it was the fate of women to suffer in the hands

or lands (because women have no country) of men whether it is Umar, Ravan or 'partition'. Partition was also fabricated by males to satisfy personal gains.

The torment of uprootment suffered by women was excruciating. As mentioned above, they were devoid of their land, their home, then they were devoid of their children, and they were rejected by their original families. Krishna Sobti's 'Sikka Badal Gaya' portrays a woman who was the sole possessor of a big *haveli* and a fertile village, which she treated as her child, and the villagers as her own. However, Shahni's bond with her land was been fractured by the same villagers for whom she was a mother figure. The villagers felt helpless before the lootings and massacres, which were going on the neighbouring villages, and they were afraid of Shahni's security. They had to make Shahni evacuate the *haveli* and leave her own village. At the time of leaving, she did not have any ill will against those villagers. She blessed them with her choked throat "May *Rabb* protect you my children, may He send you joy...." (Bhalla vol.iv, 260) This incident is reminiscent of the mothers who were forcibly disunited from their "partition children" who were left with their fathers. When the women recovery program was implemented, the children who were born of the women by the abductor posed a big problem for the government. To which country do they belong, since they were of "mixed blood". Although according to The Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act, 1949, children who were captured forcibly by either community during partition or in the years following it and the children who were born to the abducted women after partition found living with members of the other community, would be taken as being abducted. Albeit in abducted woman's precept, these children were the signs of ignominy and dishonor and they were suspicious about their children's fate and even unsure that whether their children would be accepted as members in her original family or would be put into orphanages. So, "As each woman left", said Kamlaben, "leaving her child behind, she wept, begging the camp authorities to look after the child, to keep her informed." (Butalia 273)

This statement of Kamlaben mirrors the mental agony of Shahni who is leaving behind her child, her land. The story expresses the anguish of the protagonist Shahni, who is uprooted from her land. While departing she laments, "My gold and silver! Children, all of that I leave to you. The only gold I cherish lies here in these lands." (Bhallavol.iv, 259). Krishna Sobti poignantly depicts the anguish of an aged woman characterized through Shahni, who is forced to migrate. The identity of women in similar situations was formed by their home or, as in Shahni's case by her *haveli* and the co-inhabitants of the *haveli*. When she denounces the *haveli* she feels as if she is denouncing herself. Shahni leaves but Amma in the story 'Roots' is so determined that nothing could deracinate her roots from her home. She became immobilized and clung to her house until her children returned. Her bonding with her house and her Hindu neighbour made her stick to her decision. During the time when the men folk were becoming progressively inhuman and trying to sunder the country by means of narrow sectarian walls of religion and community, it was the women who tried to fill the gaps through human kinship and altruism, undermining the cement of religious parochialism. Amma knows it in her heart that their Hindu neighbour, by breaking this narrow wall, would surely come to her rescue and finally her belief won. Roopchandji brought back Amma's family who were leaving for Pakistan. It was as if a woman's faith won over the patriarchal decision of leaving.

Though partition revealed the worst face of human shrouded in inhumanity in the time of partition, one can also see the light of compassion and love piercing the shroud with human beings reaching out across

the narrow communal and ethnical boundaries moving towards a peaceful coexistence. Women played a major role in paving the path of peace between two communities echoing Gurudev's dream of a nation "Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls" his masterpiece *Gitanjali*(p.51). It is known fact that South Asia is the center of great faiths like Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism and the axis of mingled culture and religion. This history is several chiliads old and the custom and statute of coexistence continues to the present day. Besides the selfish ambition of the national leaders, the territorial ownership was not an issue for the natives of the Indian subcontinent. The great divide of partition drew the inhabitants across the border closer because of the attachment and the craving for one's birthplace. Inhabitants of both the entitie sempathize and sympathize with each other by virtue of the shared memory and a shared past. Lines by Faiz's quoted by Kavita Panjabi in her essay "A Unique Grace" incorporated in the book *The Long Shadow*, expresses the hope for a better future based on a culture of shared love and compassion that transcends religious Identity:

Aaiye Haathuthaayen hum bhi
Come, let us raise our hands in supplication
Hum jinherasmeduayaadnahin
We, who do not remember the ritual of prayer
Hum jinhesozemohabbatkesiwah
Who, except the passion of love,
Koi but, koi Khudayaadnahin
Do not remember any idol, any god. (p.63)

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