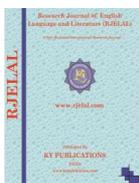




## IN THE GRIP OF TRAUMA: A STUDY OF THE VICTIMS OF PARTITION

NIBHA THAKORE

Ph. D. Scholar, University School of Languages, Gujarat University  
Ahmedabad



Article Received: 28/12/2019

Article Accepted: 18/01/2020

Article Published online:  
23/01/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.1.73](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.1.73)

### Abstract

1947 witnessed the partition of the subcontinent into two separate countries, India and Pakistan, which led to the most horrific violence and the largest migration in the history. The division of the country on the basis of religion gave rise to large scale communal riots. The violence of the most heinous kind was unimaginable, inescapable and uncontrollable. The cruelty displayed during the riots forced people to leave their ancestral homes and rush to the other side of the border. The paper attempts to study the impact of the violence and migration on the victims of the partition. It focuses on the trauma of the innocent children, the scared women and the helpless migrants.

Keywords: partition, migration, trauma

The partition of India unleashed the most atrocious crimes the world has ever seen. The scale of violence was so cruel and widespread that it paralysed the psyche and the spirit. People turned helpless in the grip of terror. The assumed incapability to fight the violence made them surrender to it. Women were raped and abducted, many a times in the presence of the family members. They were killed by the male members of the family to protect their honour. Children were the most confused souls, being incapable of understanding the events and managing themselves. The violence led to forced migration that divided numerous families. Yuvraj Krishan shares the woes of a woman staying in Lahore, who complained to Nehru as she had a lot of difficulties to visit her family in Lucknow, "What have you done, Chacha (Nehru)? My husband's country is there (Pakistan). My brother and father are here (India). We did not ask for Pakistan. It was thrust upon us." (vi)

The barbaric violence of partition was not normal and surpassed the limits of violent

imagination. The trend of sending ghost trains across the borders speaks of the boundless barbarity humans had resorted to. The bodies of women were captured, exploited, brandished and broken. Women were forced to parade naked in the streets, their breasts were cut and their bodies were marked with symbols of other religion. The innocent children were not spared and were hit hard on the ground or thrown in boiling oil to kill them.

The violence of partition has often been given the metaphor of madness. "You see, beta, there was madness in the air those days, pagalpan, violence and anger" (39) tells Mrs. Usha Chaudhary to Aanchal Malhotra describing the atmosphere during the partition. It is a common observation made by common man to authorities. G. D. Khosla in his fact finding report described the atmosphere in the subcontinent, "Madness swept over the entire land, in an ever increasing crescendo, the reason and sanity left the minds of rational men and women, and sorrow, misery, hatred, despair took possession of their souls." (3-4) The authorities safe guarded

themselves through the cover of the metaphor of madness. It was easier to lay the blame on the insanity of the people rather than their inability or unwillingness to maintain peace. Kavita Daiya says, "...because responsibility for the violence lay with all the constituencies involved (British, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs) Partition has ultimately been disavowed historically as an aberration, a moment of "insanity" in an otherwise remarkable story of non-violently achieved freedom from British oppression." (7)

H. S. Asthana delves deep into the psychology of the violence mongers during the communal riots. He mentions that social or economic discrimination leads to intense rage among the individuals. The injustice gives rise to an overwhelming feeling of helplessness, which leads an individual to indulge in any activity that would give a vent to his frustration and provide a boost to his ego. H. S. Asthana writes, "The unbearable, undefinable and unspeakable apprehensions, as Freud beautifully showed, evolve into a system originating in the unconscious which not only pose a threat but also offer a solution where self-esteem and ego integrity are guaranteed at the expense of others." (208)

H. S. Asthana tries to provide a reason behind the violence, while Robin Fox's theory clears that violence in itself is wrong. Robin Fox states that emotions of aggression and hatred are natural and emerge when stimulated. Violence, too, is a normal human response to aggressive and hateful emotions. Fox mentions, "... even if we are to blame and bewail our nature, what we should blame and bewail is not the violence per se, not aggression per se, or hatred, or evil, or sadism per se, but man's violent imagination, which enables us to use these in unprecedented, unforeseen and unintended ways... (17). He differentiates between the normal urge to be violent, but draws a line when it came to killing, "...violence is normal, natural and unproblematic when seen in its proper evolutionary perspective is not to say that extremely high levels of destructive, pointless, irrational, emotive, cruel and barbaric violence are normal..." (Fox 22-23) Fox argues that if violence is a natural attribute, then the controlling of violence is an equally natural attribute.

Ananya Jahanara Kabir focuses on the physical injuries of partition through the original definition of the Greek word trauma, an injury inflicted on the body. The marks of cultural identity on the bodies, in terms of circumcision or absence of it for Muslims and Hindus respectively and uncut hair of Sikhs exposed them to life-threatening violence. The bodies of the women were dominated and mutilated, apart from the rape, with religious marks and symbols. The physical desecration and the physical displacement, due to its link to a particular religion, made the body in the words of Ananya Jahanara Kabir, "a site of trauma." (7) The bodies were not just sites of traumas, but moving sites of trauma.

As is universal in all conflicts, women were the worst hit in this one too. The women of the time underwent unimaginable trauma and pain with rape, abduction and humiliation. Urvashi Butalia in her book 'The Other Side of Silence' provides a figure of 75000 women raped and abducted during the partition (132). Women were sold openly into the markets or were kept secretly in the harems. Nothing mattered for the women of the time; they had all gone numb. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin expressed the reaction of the women when they were asked questions, "... they were in a daze and so mentally disturbed." (83) The feeling is well expressed in poem by Jayasmitaray,

Death or life acquired equality.  
She walked numbly towards the millions,  
Who stood waiting at the railway station.  
To live in a new partitioned land,  
Or to die like a hunted animal on the "death train",  
Either way, nothing mattered anymore.

The abducted women faced complex problems during their recovery by the government. The women felt there was no meaning of going back to their families. They were ashamed that they had lost their chastity and their religion. It was all the more difficult in the cases where they had children with the abductor as they could not leave their children. Many longed to go back to their families but doubted if they would be accepted back in the fold. In a unique experience Mrudula Sarabhai, a social worker involved in the recovery of abducted

women, found a group of women expressing their anger and fears. The similarity in experience, pain and anxiety had provided them a comfortable zone to open up. Sarabhai narrates the sharing between the Muslim and Non-Muslim women, when provided the same residential space in the camp during transition,

It was a heart-rending experience to hear them talk to each other. Whether they were Hindus or Muslims or Sikhs it did not matter. They talked as woman to woman, baffled, humiliated, stunned and full of doubts for the future. Why had they been made victims of brute force was the question that puzzled them. Their common suffering created greater understanding. (Major, 66)

Laura Brown states that there is a "constant threat of trauma" (Caruth, 102) in the lives of women and questions, "What does it mean if we admit that our culture is a factory for the production of so many walking wounded?" (Caruth, 103) The women of the time were indeed wounded bodies and souls. Roop in *What the Body Remembers* thinks,

Is this India we fought for God-chosen or Godforsaken? She is like a woman raped so many times she has lost all count of the trespassers across her body. Who will rescue and pyre the bodies of my quom? What use now to be Hindu, Sikh, Muslim or Christian, what use the quom, the biradari, the caste, the compartments that order our lives? What do they do for us now in time of chaos when person meets person and the question between us is only this: Can you feel as I feel? Do you agree to let me live if I let you live? And will you keep that promise even when no one watches, under cover of sandstorms, when the veil is snatched away, will you be kind? (Baldwin 547)

Children were the unnamed sufferers of the partition. Freud believed that the childhood experiences played a major role in shaping an individual's personality. The trauma producing experiences of childhood get buried in the subconscious or the unconscious level and cause problems later in adulthood. (109) The partition had

a great impact on the tender minds of children and their upbringing. Paul R. Brass comments,

The greatest trespass of honour and boundary is the birth of children to the abducted woman, inevitable in a traditional society where birth control does not exist. When an abducted woman is found and 'recovered,' her newly born children are rejected. What is rejected is the visible stain on both the woman and the man, the evidence both of the handling of the woman by another man, thereby dishonouring the husband, and of the crossing of the boundary. The child is rejected also because, simply, it is not one's own, but another's, rejected by the community for the same reason. ( 47)

The children did as they were instructed, but were not always successful. The obedient ones who took the instructions seriously might not have faced a problem. Mrs. Usha Chaudhary, barely eight years old during the partition, gives us a glimpse of the psyche of children,

What did we know? Suddenly, we weren't allowed to go anywhere. Schools were shut and there was talk of migration to another city, far away. We were afraid but were told that it was just temporary and that we'd come back to our home, to Maghiana. Our parents told us we were going to India, but I couldn't understand that, samajh hi nahin aya ... Weren't we already in India? They said something was happening in the governments at the centre, the angrez were leaving, and that all this violence would die down after a few months. For the time being, to keep us safe, we would migrate. When your parents tell you that, you believe it. (Malhotra 39-40)

Many children paved their way out without guidance and got lost. Mrs. Usha Chaudhary narrates an incident, "There was a small Hindu child, maybe five or six years old, whom the Muslim neighbours had found hiding in a large tandoor after her family had been slaughtered. They wanted to keep her, but my father wouldn't let them. Itni khoobsurat thhi, such

a beautiful child, he bought her to our house and eventually my uncle's family adopted her, having no children of their own." (Malhotra 40)

Migration did not provide an instant solution. It was the beginning of a larger matrix of problems. As members of the other community the people faced the trauma of the violence and destruction, as migrants they faced the trauma of loss and as refugees they faced the trauma of humiliation and resettlement. The division not only separated friends but also family and broke the closest relationships. Ismat Chughtai in her essay 'Communal Violence and Literature' writes,

Those whose bodies were whole had hearts that were splintered. Families were torn apart. One brother was allotted to Hindustan, the other to Pakistan; the mother was in Hindustan, her offspring were in Pakistan; the husband was in Hindustan, his wife was in Pakistan. The bonds of human relationship were in tatters, and in the end many souls remained behind in Hindustan while their bodies started off for Pakistan. (445)

The Muslims who went from India, thought they belonged to the land and its people. The migrants were termed as mohajirs and were considered unwanted. Gardener Murphy observes,

The refugee everywhere in the modern world has found at first what seems to him to be a warm and accepting response from those among whom he is placed; almost everywhere, however, he finds after a few weeks that he does not really get what he had counted upon. People do not fully understand his sufferings, are not really ready to share with him all that they have. (83)

The realisation that the migration was a permanent one, increased their grief and nostalgia of the migrants. If there was a longing, there was also the acceptance of the futility of the nostalgia. When asked if she wished to go back Mrs. Usha Chaudhary looking at her sepia toned photo album of the past says, "Beta, ab kya sochna, now we do not think about it ever. So many years have passed. We don't

consider ourselves from there anymore. In independent India, we rebuilt our lives. We were forced to... The disarray of Partition has all but faded away and what remains are these memories. Square frames of an idyllic, carefree childhood. Bas." (Malhotra 42)

### Conclusion

The irony is neither of the newly formed governments of India and Pakistan had anticipated migrations of such staggering magnitude nor had imagined the massive uncontrollable violence. The sudden decision to pre-pone the independence, the delay in clearly demarcating the boundaries and the confusion regarding the position of the Sikhs led to the failure of setting up strategic machinery for a systematic exchange of population. It triggered a furious backlash and led to rampant communal riots. The situation deteriorated so rapidly that people fled their homes in search for safety and darted towards their part of the line. The result was a complete breakdown of law and order and an orgy of brutalities.

### Works Cited

- Asthana, H. S. "Role of Community Psychologists in Containing Riots." *Roots of Riots: Essays in Community Psychology*, edited by S. Omprakash, Kanishka Publishers, 1997, pp. 207- 214.
- Baldwin, Shauna Singh. *What the Body Remembers*. Rupa Publications, 1999.
- Brass, Paul R. "The Partition of India and Retributive Genocide in the Punjab, 1946-47: Means, Methods, and Purposes." *The Independence of India and Pakistan: New Approaches and Reflections*, edited by Ian Talbot, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 15-57.
- Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Penguin Books, 1998.
- Caruth, Cathy, editor. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

---

Chughtai, Ismat. "Communal Violence and Literature." *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 15, 2000, pp.445-456.

Daiya, Kavita. *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India*. Temple Universal Press, 2008.

Fox, Robin. "The Violent Imagination." *Aggression and Violence*, edited by Peter Marsh and Anne Campbell, Basil Blackwell, 1982, pp. 6-26.

Kabir, Ananya Jahanara. *Partition's Post-Amnesias" 1947, 1971 and Modern South Asia*. Women Unlimited, 2013.

Khosla, Gopal Das. *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of the Events Leading Up To and Following the Partition of India*. Oxford Press, 1989.

Krishan, Yuvraj. *Understanding Partition*. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2002.

Major, Andrew J. "The Chief Sufferers': Abduction of Women during the Partition of the Punjab." *Freedom, Trauma, Continuities: Northern India and Independence*, edited by D. A. Low and Howard Brasted, Sage, 1998, pp. 57-71.

Malhotra, Aanchal. "A Sepia-Toned Past: A Photo Album Travels from Maghiana to Delhi." *Looking Back: The 1947 Partition of India 70 Years On*, edited by Rakshanda Jalil et al., Orient Blackswan, 2017, pp. 36-43.

Menon, Ritu & Kamla Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. Women Unlimited, 2017.

Murphy, Gardener. *In the Minds of Men*. Basic Books Inc. Publishers, 1953.

---