

Reminiscing the pains of Partition through Amit Majmudar's *Partitions*

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Abstract:

The partition of India in 1947 into two independent nations - India and Pakistan was extremely violent. It affected the lives and minds of people in numerous ways. The dark legacy of partition witnessed the collapse of human fraternity and religious plurality resulting in the emergence of communal feud in the Indian subcontinent. The horror and the magnitude of suffering were unimaginable. Childhood and Womanhood were the worst victims subjected to coercive suicides and killings in the chaotic atmosphere of the subcontinent during partition. The present paper aims to illustrate the horrific events that occurred just after the announcement of partition through the context of Amit Majmudar's fictional work *Partitions* (2011). The novel *Partitions* unfolds some realistic episodes of terrible violence and displacement from the point of view of Hindu twin boys Keshav and Shankar who were forced to leave their home in Pakistan and migrate to India after the announcement of partition. It will also discuss the miserable condition of young girls and women through a Sikh girl Simran who had been subjected to heinous acts of gendered violence such as honor killing, abduction, rape, and mutilation, both by men of their community and by others. The paper will also reflect upon another outlook of the partition i.e., human kindness, in which a few people of either side still carry on their friendships and moral responsibilities by helping others across religious lines.

Keywords: Partition, Violence, Displacement, Humanity, Amit Majmudar.

Introduction

The Partition of British India in 1947 is one of the most traumatic events in Indian history. It was not only the division of colonial India into two separate dominions i.e., India and Pakistan, but also accompanied by one of the largest mass migrations in human history and violence on a scale that had hardly ever been seen before in the legacy of the Indian subcontinent. Regarding the turmoil of partition, Horace Alexander writes, “There must be many examples in the bloody history of mankind where the extent of violence has been as great or even greater but it is probably true that there has never been such a big exchange of population” (Basu 103). It is estimated that nearly 14 million people were displaced, almost one million people were killed and at least fifty thousand women were abducted, raped, and mutilated. Urvashi Butalia in her book *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) states that “the political partition of India is caused one of the great human convulsions of history . . . about twelve million people moved between the new, truncated Indian and the two wings, East and West of the newly created Pakistan. . . . Estimates of the dead from 200,000 to 2 million but somewhere around a million people died and, about 75000 women were thought to be abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion” (Butalia 3). Extremely violent, it affected the peaceful lives of especially the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in numerous ways who had once experienced a longstanding inter-communally shared history. The dark legacy of partition witnessed the collapse of human fraternity and religious plurality resulting in the emergence of communal feud in the Indian subcontinent. The horror and the magnitude of suffering were unimaginable. There were screams of terror, disgusting sights of decapitated bodies, and irreversible separations from the near and dear ones. The violent nature of partition can also be felt through C. Ryan Perkin’s words as he says, “Up to two million people lost their lives in the most horrific of manners. The darkened landscape bore silent

witness to trains laden with the dead, decapitated bodies, limbs strewn along the sides of roads, and wanton rape and pillaging” (Perkins).

Women and children during the partition, were the weaklings among the victims who were victimized by the violence performed by their own and the alien patriarchal clans. Many a lot were orphaned, widowed, abducted, and unattached. Children lost their parents, friends, families and even their childhood as they saw them getting slaughtered mercilessly in front of their eyes. Same as with women who witnessed the most heinous forms of violence during 1947 riots ranging from the abduction, rape, castration, and tattooing to honour killings and mutilation of bodies. Jason Francisco states that they were “beaten, maimed, tortured, raped, abducted, exposed to disease and exhaustion, and otherwise physically brutalized remains measureless” (Francisco 371). Thus, the trauma of the horrendous experiences unleashed by the partition affected the whole warp and woof of their lives in such a way that they kept silent by keeping their personal experiences hidden and weighing them as unhealed baggage for years.

Literature Review

Several research studies such as scholarly articles, essays, web pages and thesis are available on the selected text “*Partitions*”. The thesis “Engendered Violence against Women during Partition in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* and Amit Majmudar’s *Partitions*” (2016) by Gabriel Clement Chua Chen Wei has examined the literary depiction of engendered violence against women set during the 1947 partition of India with the aim to discover the role of socio-cultural attitudes in stifling the voices of marginalized especially of women in partition narratives. She also discussed in detail the engendered violence which is described as a violation of women’s bodies, and their psyches by men, which is carried out in various forms such as abduction, rape, honor killings, forced marriages, forced religious conversion and bodily mutilations.

The essay “Going beyond: Re-Membering the Partition of India in *Partitions* (2011), by Amit Majmudar” by Elisabetta Marino has explored how Amit Majmudar portrays the trauma of 1947 with the intention of addressing pivotal issues of migration, gender, and identity. Another article “India at war: A critical study of Amit Majmudar’s novel *Partitions*” by Wahid Pervez et al. have discussed the events that occurred shortly after the partition of India through Majmudar’s *Partitions*.

So far, several research studies have been conducted to examine the novel *Partitions* through various perspectives. The available thesis and articles describe about one female character as a protagonist of the novel, particularly Simran Kaur. However, there are other major characters as well and their discussion is important to give a complete picture of the bloody legacy of India’s partition where the silenced childhood and womanhood got victimized by coercive suicides and mass killings. Thus, the purpose of the present paper is to analyze what actually happened with the children and women who were subjected to heinous violence and suffering during the 1947 riots and its consequences that shaped their lives.

Amit Majmudar’s *Partitions*

The dark legacy of the partition could not be erased as it affected writers of the period who were not able to ignore and remain unconcerned about what took place in the society around them. Hence many wrote to express their shock and trauma of the violence and horror of what humans could do to other human beings. As they narrate the suffering of the masses, they were careful not to go into the reasons of the carnage or to fix the blame. From Saadat Hasan Manto, Khushwant Singh, Bhisham Sahni, Intizar Husain, Rajinder Singh Bedi to Salman Rushdie depict the state of affairs in a different way. Apart from these stalwarts, there are several authors who do not experience the partition first-hand, nor their families and relatives have stories of that

time and everything they know about this tumultuous period of history through reading the existing literature on partition. Among these writers, Amit Majmudar, an American diagnostic nuclear radiologist by profession, an award-winning poet, and a novelist, is a new voice who explored the themes of violence and brutality, immigrant experience, identity, history, the clash of cultures, and mortality in his writings. His works include novels- *Partitions* (2011), *The Abundance* (2013), and *Sitayana* (2019), poetry - *Entrance* (1997), *0°, 0°: Poems* (2009), *Heaven and Earth* (2011) and translation - *Godsong: a verse translation of the Bhagavad Gita*.

Majmudar's debut novel *Partitions* is an effort from the author's side bring into light a dark chapter in Indian history whose presence could be still felt in today's times whenever there is a religion, region, caste or gender-based conflict occurs in the Indian society. For those who are unaware of the bloody legacy of the Indian partition, the story of the novel carries them through the horrific event and its aftermath effects on the common folk especially on women and children who experienced the violence and suffering of partition. The word partition does not mean only the division of the British India but more refers to what happens after the Pakistan has become a reality.

Partition, Violence and Dispersal of children

The nature of partition was violent from the very first day as the rumours of the division came into the public domain. Violence was uncontrollable because of communal revenge. From the very beginning of the novel, Majmudar has represented the miseries, and hardships that the innocent children and women had to face as the riots of 1947 happened on both sides of the newly created border. The author has shown the separation of two sons, Keshav, and Shankar (who are just six years old) of Sonia who is an untouchable widow of the Brahmin Dr. Roshan Jaitlee. In the city Lahore, people started to move hastily for their survival. When Sonia with his

twins Keshav and Shankar reaches at the railway station of Lahore, she stays stunned by seeing the platform that already heaves with the hundred Hindus and Sikhs who take to their heels towards India. Keshav and Shankar get separated from her mother Sonia as they try to board the train and their sufferings and difficulties start. They fall from the moving train, and both get injured badly. As in the novel, “Keshav just make it; forearms, stomach, fall just a second later . . . He hits the tracks, tumbles and skids a few feet and come to a stop in the train’s monstrous shadow” (Majmudar 11). Menon And Bhasin also remarked on the forced migration and separation of children from their parents during the partition riots as shown in the novel by Majmudar through the plight of Sonia and her twins. “As the violence increased, however the migrations took an urgent and treacherous character; convoys were ambushed, families separated, children orphaned, women kidnapped-and whole train loads massacred” (Menon and Bhasin 35).

The course of their suffering was endless. The novelist draws another incident that was the catastrophic outcome of communal revenge. Both Keshav and Shankar get trapped in the false hopes of Saif, a Muslim kidnapper who involved in the kidnapping of Hindu boys during the partition riots. Saif further sells the twins to Shanaz Bibi who is interested in adopting Hindu boys by making them her foster children. Though Bibi is very caring in nature but the longing for the mother Sonia traumatizes the twins. Finally, both decides to escape from the clutches of Shanaz Bibi, but Shankar cannot run like Keshav because he is suffering from the disease called “Blue disease”. So, partition was a time when children got victimized due to communal attacks separating from their parents and being orphaned. Many of them died due to their sufferings and those who survived had to live their lives under miserable conditions. Yasmin Khan states in his book *The Great Partition*, “women and children were carried away like looted chattels and in a

way that one could hardly believe that they were alive” (Khan 128). This shows that the children were the worst victims during the partition. They not only suffered the separation from their families but also suffered violence at the hands of kidnappers. They suffered mentally as well as physically during and even after the partition. It becomes clear that the majority of deaths during the partition were the deaths of young children who were weaklings who could not protect themselves from the communal fury of partition.

Violence on Women during Partition

Majmudar has also depicted the violence on women during the partition in different forms such as abduction, rape, mutilation of bodies, castration, etc. through the fictitious character named Simran Kaur, a Sikh teenager who was mentally traumatized. The communal strife especially targeted the women of both the religions. Such episodes of sexual savagery bring to surface the patriarchal attitude of treating the women body as an object of communal reprisal or as a sexual commodity. In the novel, Simran being a female is doubly traumatized. Her trauma first starts at her own house where she, her mother, and her cousins are at the mercy of her father’s gunpoint so that the honor of the family and chastity of the women can be preserved or saved. Simran is emotionally and mentally distressed at the dreadful sight of the mass homicide of her mother and cousins. The massacre was done by the menfolk to save the chastity of their women.

His brother, he realizes, is right. It must be done; it is the only way to protect them. It annihilations were all then they might as well risk flight. But the women and the boy risked something worse. To line in their shackles: his girls, their wives, daily servitude, and nightly violence, in a few years not even remembering their true nature . . . Dying Sikh for being a Sikh: this must be the women’s glory.
(Majmudar 39)

It shows the helplessness of the family women who did not have any choice but to embrace suicide or yield to mass killing destined by their own men. Such incidents of violence performed by the communities' men over their women were regarded as heroic deeds to be honored.

The sufferings of Simran Kaur reach its peak when she falls in the hands of Ayub and Saif and becomes the victim of abduction. Majmudar narrates, “Qasim and Saif got down, their bared teeth and eyes gleefully white while Ayub strips Simran of her clothes” (Majmudar 132). Partition was the time when women or underage girls were abducted, raped, kidnapped, and were even sold in the market as objects which were created for the purpose of enjoyment for the menfolk that becomes clear from the novel where Qasim says, “The money these days, Qasim explains, is in girls” (Majmudar 95). Yasmin Khan also explains the ferocity of partition over the women bodies, “women were brutally raped and had their breasts and genitals mutilated and the entire population of the villages was summarily executed” (Khan 129).

Women also enslaved to the shame, fear, dishonour syndrome (Menon and Kamla 59) which grabbed those women who were subjected to sexual violation by the men of other communities. So, to keep away from such a syndrome, most of the women sacrificed their lives by committing suicides that were praised by their menfolk as an honorable death. Those who survived, they were abducted by the marauders or hooligans and compelled either to choose a life with the kidnappers or choose a life of a prostitute. In Qasim words, “Certain nawabs are paying three thousand rupees for each piece . . .” (Majmudar 95). Such situations became the cause of death of several innocent girls who could have better life but due to such hideous monsters their hopes and bright future was destroyed. This shows that the female had to undergo the most catastrophes during the partition.

Humanity in World of Chaos

Partition was a period of madness and despair that led to a complete breakdown in society. The harmony among various communities for ages collapsed. They had become enemies of one another and saw each other with an eye of hatred and distrust. It was a time when people of subcontinent killed mercilessly one another without reason. The one and only one reason was that they all belonged to different religion, community, caste, and creed. As the riots happened, people started to kill their neighbors, friends, brothers, daughters, wives and even children for their honour. Women and children were the worst victim as women were abducted and raped violently, children were sold in the market as toys or for household works. There was no hope of any justice for the people, and they were only at the behest of their destiny or fate. In such turbulent times, there were a few people who came forward to help each other across religious lines for a better future for them and for their coming generations. Majmudar in the novel presents this situation through the characters of Dr. Masud, Shankar, Keshav, and Simran who get united by shedding their religious identities, caste, and community, and start to live like a family, "The whole family." (Majmudar 200) It depicts a mixed pattern of religious identities as Dr. Masud is a Muslim doctor, Simran is a Sikh girl, and Keshav and Shankar upper caste Hindus. Thus, their union proclaims the dawn of hope as they form a family that no longer feels threatened.

Conclusion

This study has examined some heart-rending events associated with partition. Through the analysis of the novel *Partitions*, the paper narrates the trauma of children and women caught in the communal reprisal of the historical event. The characters in the novel served as a mouthpiece for the silenced voices. During the turbulent times, no one knows exactly how many were beaten, tortured, maimed, or killed in communal violence among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. Women

and children were the worst victims, as women or teenage girls were abducted, molested, raped, humiliated, and had their genitalia mutilated. Many were even forcibly converted by their abductors. Children were weaklings at the time of partition. Though they survived physically, they carry the psychological scars with them throughout their lives.

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