

Representing the Unrepresentable: Contemplating on the Echoes of Partition Discourse

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Abstract

Inquiries into the politics of Partition have amply acquired a dominant space in academic discourse. The stronghold of intertwined trajectories of Partition violence, nationhood and communalism for past seven decades in the official narratives has relegated its human experience to an ephemeral occurrence. Majority of Partition literature restricts the representation of trauma by branding the violence as communal insanity that need not be recorded, revisited, and retold. Perhaps, the historians feared that the discussion of this communal cataclysm would herald a similar recurrence. Thus, Partition historiography shunned the existence of the personal testimonies of its victims. The traditional cannon falls short at portraying the historical memory of debilitating loss and horrific trauma which became the truth of its survivors. Only recently have the academicians begun to appreciate the implications of the indelible mark of the memories of violence left on human history. This paper attempts to probe into the unheard echoes of Partition Discourse to investigate the significance of narrativising Partition violence, which has been left behind the shadows.

Keywords: Partition, echoes, testimony, violence, trauma, and memory.

Introduction

Attempts to inquire India's Partition (in 1947) seem to be an ongoing endeavour because its echoes reverberate in the psyche of its population as well as the geo-politics of the region. It becomes especially true considering the experiences of the populace, as explicated in Madhav Godbole's *The Holocaust of Indian Partition*:

...more than the partition itself, what captivated me was the colossal human tragedy which was the traumatic and inevitable culmination of the partition. It showed how millions of common, innocent persons, far removed from politics, became mere pawns in the hands of apparently larger-than-life politicians and the British who were in authority, in their games of one-up-manship. ("Preface" xi)

Resonating this viewpoint, Govind Nihalani, the Director of the film *Tamas* comments that, "For me, who has deep impressions of the holocaust of partition, (my first memories of fright, panic and blood are from that period)" ("Introduction" 4). The unanticipated threat due to the sudden surge in communitarianism resulted in both panic as well as the abandonment of moral restraint in the people. The available corpus of historical writings on Partition vouches for the

horrors of communal violence due to this moral abdication. Consequently, the uncertain socio-political circumstances led to the casualty of ethical integrity and communal harmony in the subcontinent. The issue of the representation of such exceptional violence is quite challenging to resolve as it is incredibly strenuous to embody the individual experiences of Partition and its afterlife, in its entirety. To explain this issue, one requires an objective and apolitical vision as to why Partition's human side requires recognition. Contemplation is imperative upon us, not only to acquire critical insights from this "manmade Greek tragedy" but also to appreciate the value of narrativising the most gruesome historical episode of our collective past (xi).

Arguably, the nature of communal violence in 1946-7 is the very reason why it has been left untouched for so many decades. The enormous uprooting of countless people, the dreadfully rampant sexual violence, and the unfortunate abductions of thousands of young women and children, constitute the ugly reality of this untouched aspect of India's dissection. In the words of Anders Bjorn Hansen, Partition violence had been "liberated and brutalised" in the sense that it's "rationale ... was no longer a question of maintaining the status quo but of ethnically cleansing one's area" (*Partition and Genocide* 127). "The perpetrators of" Partition "violence," unlike the earlier communal disruptions witnessed in the region "showed a willingness to commit both ethnic cleansing and genocidal violence" (127). It was as if the subcontinent (collectively) had surrendered to the viciousness of this tragedy, wanting to be set ablaze on the behest of a few communalists. Manto vividly pens down this viciousness of political leaders as follows:

The world ... contains some whose time is spent in sharpening their swords and daggers.... They are our leaders.... They are like a cat's claws. Soft and furry if seen from the top. Sharp and vicious if seen from below. If you heard them speak, it would sound like they feel the world's pain in their breast. But this pretence is not hidden for long. (*Why I Write* 69)

This historic moment of political reconfiguration brought in brutal violence whose reminiscences have been restricted to a liminal space. This "disregarded" "social history" constitutes "the 'human dimension' of partition, i.e. a descriptive account of the event and not a debate over its causes" (Chakravarty 3). These unsung strands of our social history represent the ceaseless march of time carrying the echoes of the forgotten beings of the past. Buried beneath the canonical discourses, these echoes prioritize the marginalized voices that are usually considered too mundane for intellectual pursuits. This act of reclamation of silenced voices challenges the delusion of standardised historic narrative which is unsurmountable to include the veiled truths and unspoken realities. This 'other side' of Partition, as Urvashi Butalia calls it, is pregnant with the personal experiences of the victims of our historical misfortune. The "alternative archive of the times" of "Partition," is a source of its "unofficial histories" that "offer valuable ways of rethinking the official history ... because of its ability to convey 'individual fates' in the specific moment" (Ramone, *Postcolonial Theories* 61). By rethinking our official histories, we move away from the glorified fragments, to uncover the shrouded strands of memory. Questioning the official historical narrative facilitates the rearticulation of the suppressed voices and memory of the victims of Partition. Jane Taylor remarks that, "individual narratives come to stand for the larger national narrative," in the sense that the "stories of personal grief, loss, triumph and violation ... stand as an account of" our nation's past (qtd. in Meskin and Walt 137). Partition, in this sense, has created an abyss of our collective history—a festering sore that inflamed the land

as well as the souls residing on it. It altered the identities of the people making them outsiders/refugees overnight, completely disrupting the delicate links between coexisting communities. The stable lives of individuals were drowned in the commotion of communitarian violence; thus, burning buildings, scattered bodies and wailing voices became the new reality. When such personal suffering of the masses is unveiled, it marks as a momentous shift in the tradition of historical representation. This alteration in the historical representation allows the researchers as well as the academicians to delve into the untouched aspect of our collective past because "...the speaking of trauma is a necessary prerequisite to individual and national healing..." (Bray and Bray, "Introduction" viii). Voicing the trauma is an essential precondition "for any kind of psycho-social healing to occur... to explore the voicing of trauma – the *representing of the unrepresentable*" becomes indispensable (Emphasis added; Meskin and Walt 132). In sum, this research work examines the inattention to the psycho-social aspect of Partition which fail to configure in the politically-sanctioned narratives of the time, and the impact of the exclusion on those who underwent this trauma.

Discussion

Communal vehemence reached genocidal intensity as gendered persecution was occasioned to terrorize the religious minorities; the post-memory of this malicious persecution manifested quite late in its victims making their afterlife a saga of suffering. This post-memory had been relegated to a secondary status in the subsequent years of country's segmentation, as more compelling issues such as the rehabilitation of the uprooted population, and the recovery and restoration of missing people required immediate attention. However, the fragmentary individual experiences occupied a back-seat in the academic discourse due to its communally sensitive nature. Contemporary times have witnessed a change in this practice; in the last decade, however, Partition discourse has moved away from the politics of the event. As a consequence, the otherwise repressed narratives that failed to make it in the official version of our history have acquired prominence. Tinged with extreme horridness and its resultant trauma, these unofficial narratives voice out that truth, which is "usually deemed [to be] unspeakable" (Saint "Exorcizing the Ghosts of Times Past" 73). These narratives fill up the gaps left behind by the mainstream historical discourse. Conforming to this viewpoint, Suvir Kaul in *The Partitions of Memory* mentions that:

So much that happened during Partition needs to be catalogued. Beginnings have been made to collate [the] 'unofficial' accounts (oral histories and testimonials) ... to reconstruct events ranging from the micro level the lives of individuals and families to the mass movement of the populations ... personal accounts of the rampant abductions, killing, and looting during Partition... ("Introduction" 5)

This multifaceted domain of our collective past offers a distinctive insight into their unfathomable traumas, instigating the psyche of all its listeners/ readers. Connecting history, memory, and trauma these individual experiences truly imbibe the dreadful brutality of communal violence vented upon the people of the subcontinent. It bears witness to the enflamed testimonies of its victims, uncovering the utterly disrupted morality and humanity in the subcontinent.

Moving Beyond the Official Archives

The official archives are constituted by secret official reports of the administrative officers,

their correspondences, public speeches of the leaders, their letters, assembly debates of the politicians, their biographies and autobiographies, political memoirs, so on and so forth. Apart from these sources, individual testimonies (interviews), personal memoirs, fictional narratives depict the afterlife of Partition which constitutes this unconventional side of the event. The personal testimonies provide dignity to the disregarded, voice to the unheard and a stage to the overlooked, reinforcing the idea that even the marginal can be mainstreamed. Official histories abounding with privilege and power exhibit the tyranny of unidimensional reality, thereupon, lacking depth in its presentation. It is the bare essence of individual histories that unshackles the lived realities residing at the margins of memory. Aligned to this view, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin mention in *Borders and Boundaries* that:

The importance of literary, autobiographical, oral historical and fragmentary material for an understanding of Partition has now been acknowledged by historians and others, concerned specially with the study of ethnic conflict and violence and, by extension, for the writing of history itself ... the “fragment” is significant precisely because it is marginal rather than mainstream, particular (even individual) rather than general, and because it presents history from below. (8)

This ‘history from below’ exists alongside the officially sanctioned account, waiting to be included in the academic discourse. The marginal historical accounts are the soul of our collective past. This lived-reality is the humane fervour that is usually absent from the cold weary records of history books. Existing in the shadows of the formidable figures of political power, it is a reminder to the one seeking the actuality that monolithic history is only a one-sided story. Inclusion of this collective history is a moral reckoning for the unsung masses. Its “pluralization” confers “a rare and politically important opportunity for scrutinizing” a diverse gamut of narratives “through which memory” can be “articulated” (Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive* 102). Tarun K. Saint confers to this perspective as follows:

... studies of the Partition based on memories of survivors [bring] up critical questions as regards earlier silence in mainstream Partition historiography.... The interconnections between history and memory ... further [unearth] some of the conundrums pertaining to the settlement that was arrived at, including the speed and pace at which the decision was sought to be implemented, and the ferocity and scale of collective violence that was unleashed, leading up to one of the longest and most extensive mass migrations in human history.

As modes of testimony, these [unofficial] narratives continue to provide inspiration for those reckoning with the impact of extreme forms of violence on the mind and on the society... (“Exorcizing the Ghosts of Times Past” 74-5)

The plurality of historical events uncovers “the conscious and unconscious legacy that history and memory—unwillingly or lucidly—leave for the forth coming generations” (Felman, “Education and Crisis” 58). This traumatic legacy constitutes the hidden side of our collective past whose historical reality gets systematically obliterated when even the possibility of addressing such memories is denied to its victim, making “violence ... all the more obscene” (Felman 43). The disregard of the unhealed wounds to present a whitewashed version of the past is in fact a denial of the basic rights for the subjects of a Nation, reducing them to the status of a mere arbitrary “target” (44).

Understanding the Impact of Historical Trauma

The debilitating psychological trauma resulting from historic events such as the World Wars, Holocaust or Partition lies not in its occurrence, rather in the unfolding—the internalization of memory by its survivors. This “pathology” entails “in the *structure of experience* or reception” of the traumatic “event,” as it “is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time due to the shock of its unexpected occurrence” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4-5). The reality of the dreadful horror of the traumatic experience sinks in “only belatedly,” that too “in its repeated *possession*” by the victim (4-5). These “traumatized” sufferers are psychologically “possessed by” that “image or event” and can never completely detach themselves from their past trauma (4-5). The insidious nature of traumatic occurrence does not allow the victim to completely grasp its intensity at the time. It traps the experience beneath the conscious mind denying the individual to heal himself. The psyche is deeply imbued in this unresolved grief because of the “personal significances attached to” that experience, compelling the victim to revisit the moment of atrocity (4-5). Resultantly, the impact of the traumatic past keeps on reverberating inside the unconscious mind. Bhisham Sahni vividly articulates this condition of morbid introspection of Partition survivors as follows:

[T]hey lacked the capacity to weigh, assess and understand if not forget-those experiences. All they could do was stare vacantly into space or listen to the horror stories of others. [One’s] heart went out to them but what could [one] do? None of them knew what they wanted even if [someone] had been able to help them. They didn’t even have a hazy outline of the future. Time moved on relentlessly but they had no control over it. If hungry, they scurried about for food. If they remembered something, they just wept. Otherwise from morning until evening they just sat there listening to one another’s tales. (*Tamas* 153).

The trauma of the past takes control of the present, plunging the victim in perpetual misery. Behind this unresolved trauma exists an array of unheard narratives awaiting its closure. The only respite from this heinousness is an empathetic observer of their grief, in whose absence healing becomes an uncertainty. As Butalia puts it, “unless ... we are able to talk about Partition, I fear we may not be able to put it behind us” (26). “History does not give you leave to forget so easily” (31). However, the tendency to hurriedly move-on from the past i.e. the collective desire “to leave behind or leave in abeyance” is the root cause of this “problem” (*Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra 145). The traumatic experiences of a phenomenal event, like Partition, should never go unnoticed. This pain needs to be dealt with at the earliest, for repression can never be on par with emancipation. Excessive insistence on ‘closure’ without understanding the nature of traumatic memories, with regard to Partition, has resulted in the repressing of the traumatic memories of an entire generation. Avoidance is that “facile notion of cure” that “obscures” any possibility of “closure” (145). This restrictive outlook that perceives history, politics, ethics and psychology to be separate domains is a contributing factor in the open wounds of the Partition’s victims. Thus, the prerequisite is “to connect psychoanalytic categories to ethical, political, and historical issues” (145). This connection between the political, historical, ethical and the psychoanalytic categories enables us to appreciate the wide expanse of the unconscious mind, particularly in its tendency of dealing with traumatic memories. It allows us to critically access the concealed agendas behind political decisions, the ethical conundrums enmeshed with collective memory of historic transgressions and its

unresolved haunting trauma. Bringing together these categories illustrates how collective historic wounds, muted desires and stifled anxieties are linked to ideological frameworks and socio-political structures. This holistic approach facilitates the reconsideration of issues such as political power, social responsibility, ethical dilemmas and moral accountability.

Narrativizing the Unofficial History

The academicians and historians laid astoundingly limited emphasis on the portrayal of personal as well as collective trauma because of the political implications that apportioned a limited reeling of uncomfortable truths. Butalia voices this tragedy as follows:

Twelve million people were displaced as a result of Partition. Nearly one million died. Some 75,000 women were raped, kidnapped, abducted, forcibly impregnated by men of the ‘other’ religion, thousands of families were split apart, homes burnt down and destroyed, villages abandoned. Refugee camps became part of the landscape of most major cities in the north, but, a half century later, there is still no memorial, no memory, no recall, except what is guarded, and now rapidly dying, in families and collective memory (44-5).

Its primary cause is that historians do not realize the deeply pervasive nature of this collective memory. Thus, the documentation of historical events like wars, mass-rapes, and ethnic violence becomes a rarity. Such a selective presentation of our collective history is managed at the cost of the disregard for the multiple life-histories of the people that are acutely sensitive in nature. When historians and academicians decide to evade these life-histories, they unintentionally and undeservedly establish the subservience of its citizens in the documentation of national-histories. For this reason, human catastrophes such as the World Wars, Holocaust and Partition are limited to the statistics of the injured and the deceased; ergo, the reconstruction of its traumatic memory cannot simply be restricted to a handful of narrations. In such circumstances, strenuous efforts are required to probe into the splitting aftereffects on psyche of the afflicted beings. These overlooked life-histories of the wounded need to be revisited and retold consistently as each retelling leads to the excavation of unknown insights. This excavation is significant because “[t]he facts of history are indeed facts of individuals” that show us the true picture of our past (Carr, *What is History?* 52). It facilitates the examination of the lived experiences of the previous generations from a new vantage point focusing on what Partition “actually meant to the people who experienced it” (Chakravarty 109-110). Fundamentally, history is not an austere and singular construct but a rich mosaic that carries the lived reality of the multitude. Every juncture in history finds its roots in personal tribulations and inner conflicts of the populace. Top of Form

Conclusion

In sum, the verbal acknowledgement and recurrent narration of our historical catastrophes is a positive step towards the therapeutic remedy of its psychological wounds. The openness of such deep-seathed historical trauma binds the survivor with recurrent bouts of melancholy and only the cathartic release of this terrifying ordeal can be its remedy. To accomplish this objective, one needs to relinquish political correctness of Partition historiography. By recounting our unheeded collective past, we unveil the brutal violence, forced migrations, and the struggle of survival during that moment of rupture. Away from the operations of nationhood, we are acquainted with a more evocative picture of this catastrophic past. Portraying the human dimension of this

event, the discourse is centred on the civic and political fault-lines that incessantly reverberate despite the passage of time. The debacle of 1947 enlightens us with the agonizing echoes of the time which still permeates in our lives. This realisation forces us to consider that confining Partition within a limited temporal and academic framework cripples our investigations of the same. Thus, a pragmatic approach is required to comprehend our traumatic history along with its socio-political context to evaluate its subjective psychological nuances, as these individual memories of Partition survivors help us discern the critical enquiries that continue to reverberate till date.

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