



Gendered Oppression and the Partition of India: An Exploration of Fozia Raja's Daughters of Partition

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Abstract

*India's partition in 1947 is regarded as one of the most horrendous incidents which leave indelible marks on the psyche of Indian history. The partition of India results in communal riots, violence, displacement, loss and trauma. This blood-stained chaotic time gives birth to the memories of mass dislocation, intolerance, murder and violence. Violence and atrocities especially happen to women. The traumatic experiences of partition survivors demonstrate the plight of women and their wounded souls caused by the partition. Women become doubly oppressed – firstly due to their community identity and secondly because of their gendered status in society. Innumerable literary representations, survivors' testimonies and unofficial documents support this issue of the gendered oppression relating to the partition of India. On the one hand, the partition is remembered as a time of great uncertainty, humiliation and trauma, and on the other, it is connected with survival and later recovery from personal and material loss. The memories of partition continue to circulate across generations; and these are related to the loss of homeland, trauma, dislocation and resettlement. The historical reality of the partition of India haunts the UK-based writer Fozia Raja's novel *Daughters of Partition* (2020). This novel is a historical account of Taji Kaur, the author's grandmother who was a victim of Indian partition. The novel deals with the issues of loss, border, religion and migration during and after the partition. This paper is an exploration of the issue of the gender-based oppression during and after the partition of India.*

Keywords: *Partition, Dislocation, Oppression, Violence, Trauma, Gender.*

Introduction

The partition of India results in communal riots, violence, displacement, loss and trauma. This blood-stained chaotic time gives birth to the memories of mass dislocation, intolerance, murder and violence. "There was widespread sexual savagery: about 75,000

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women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own (and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion). Thousands of families were divided, homes were destroyed, crops left to rot, villages abandoned” (Butalia 3). The partition of India is remembered as an incident of oppression, violence, anger, sadness, trauma and loss. This partition is considered one of the darkest moments in the history of South Asia. Women have undergone the events of unbearable trauma and oppressions. Violence and atrocities have especially happened to women. The traumatic experiences of partition survivors demonstrate the plight of women and their wounded souls caused by the partition. Women become doubly oppressed – firstly due to their community identity and secondly because of their gendered status in society. The partition narratives portray distressing pictures of the condition of the people who were the victims of Indian partition and who left their own places and houses for safety and reached new places to reshape their dreams. The partition narratives, therefore, focus on the feelings of trauma, nostalgia and dislocation of the helpless victims of the partition. Many partition novels depict the nature and extent of the sufferings and the traumatic feelings of women who were robbed of happiness, raped, killed, married forcibly to men of other religions. On the one hand, the partition is remembered as a time of great uncertainty, humiliation and trauma, and on the other, it is connected with survival and later recovery from personal and material loss. The memories of partition continue to circulate across generations; and these are related to the loss of homeland, trauma, dislocation and resettlement. The suffering of women due to the Indian partition is multifarious. Fozia Raja’s novel *Daughters of Partition* (2020) can be read as a narrative of gendered oppression in respect of the background of the partition of India. This novel demonstrates the multidimensional aspects of the suffering of women victims of Indian partition – women’s trauma, rootlessness and consequent struggles to adapt in new circumstances.

Analysis

Oppression means exercise of power in a cruel or unjust manner to maltreat and exploit a group of individuals. It creates a situation where people are governed in an unfair and cruel way and prevented from having opportunities and freedom. When a person or group in a position of power controls the less powerful or the powerless in unfair or cruel ways, that can be called oppression; it is an act of subjugating through cruelty and injustice. Violence, exploitation, harassment, abuse are different ways of oppression. Humiliation is a common form of oppression. Humiliation denotes an act of depriving one of one’s self-esteem or self-respect or honour; it unjustly posits one in a degrading situation. The victims of oppression and humiliation are, however, made helpless and depressed. Oppression and humiliation can cause tremendous physical and mental damage to the victims. Oppression is an injustice and an evil. One can be oppressed individually or as a member of a group or community or a nation. The harmful effects of oppression can cause physical and mental wounds to an individual, and can thereby destroy his basic identity as a man. The oppressed people undergo experiences of inequality, torture, exploitation, humiliation, harassment, etc. Oppressed people suffer injustice and disadvantage. Oppression implies negation of man’s freedom. So, when and where oppression prevails, man’s autonomy and self-actualization is denied. Ann Cudd in her book *Analyzing Oppression* (2006) defines oppression as “an

institutionally structured, unjust harm perpetrated on groups by other groups through direct and indirect material and psychological forces” (28). Sybil S. C. Anderson in his book *Hegel's Theory of Recognition* (2009) gives a definition of oppression: “Oppression is that condition in which, through deliberate or unintentional acts, a system of social and institutional constraints is imposed upon social groups that thwarts their members’ resilient autonomy” (34). These two definitions mean that oppression destroys one’s freedom, identity, self-confidence, etc. Oppression works through social, political and economic practices and institutions. According to Iris Marion Young, all oppressed people in any society of the world face some problems in developing their ability, skill and personality; and the oppressed people cannot even exercise their capacities. They, in fact, cannot express their own needs, feelings and thoughts. Iris Young has mentioned five forms of oppression – exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. However, gendered oppression refers to the oppression caused because of gender or sex. The partition of India is associated with gendered oppression as women had to suffer various forms of oppression during the partition due to their gender.

The partition of India carried with it horrors and experiences of suffering. The resonance and repercussions of the Indian partition haunted many writers during last seventy years. Violent and bloody moment of the birth of the nation produces religious intolerance and communal prejudice. The fatal consequences of the partition have been depicted by Khushwant Singh in his novel *Train to Pakistan*, in which Mano Majra, a fictional village, provides the backdrop of the plot. “Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped” (Singh 1). In the introduction to the new edition of her book *The (other) Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998), Urvashi Butalia has written that partition history is indeed difficult to forget and it is important to remember this violent history “for the sake of those who lived through it and died, and equally the sake of those who lived through it and survived. And for the sake of those who may have had little to do with it directly, but who continue to be deeply involved with taking its legacies, negative as well as positive, into the future” (xv). Butalia’s book is a chronicle of partition as it contains testimonies, memories and oral narratives from women, children and dalits who are the marginalized groups in a society. Memories, recollections, “stories and histories” (95) of the partition of the people on the margins have been authentically recorded in Butalia’s book. “It is now widely known that sexual violence happened on a mass scale during Partition, and nearly a hundred thousand women were believed to have been abducted, raped, sometimes sold into prostitution, sometimes forcibly married” (xvii). Urvashi Butalia has mentioned the wounds of the partition through the stories of “homes lost, fields looted, families uprooted, brothers and sisters divided, but also of rape and sexual assault” (xx). According to Butalia, the history of the partition is closely related to religion, region, gender, minority status and caste. The authentic experiences of the people whose lives were directly or indirectly affected by the Indian partition have been explored by Butalia in her book. The people who have been in the margins of history and who have been severely victimized at the time of the partition have got a space to voice their memories in this book.

The partition of India in 1947 is sincerely dealt with by several renowned writers. Clashes and conflicts among different religious communities took place during the partition. Violence, abduction, rape, grabbing of property, human slaughter, etc. occurred. People of different religious groups and communities experienced varied problems and crises not only during the partition but even after several years. In respect of religion, a group of people can be categorized as marginal. In a place where the minorities in respect of religion are subjugated by the people belonging to dominant religion become marginalized. These marginalized people are more cruelly oppressed and humiliated especially during social upheavals like partition related riots. Minority women suffer more on such occasions. They are raped and abducted. They suffer trauma and anxiety. Their basic religious identity faces severe crisis. An abducted and raped woman is not merely physically wounded; she receives tremendous psychic wounds.

Fozia Raja has dealt with the issues of gendered oppression during the partition of India along with the themes of trauma and loss of home and happiness of women before, during and after the partition. She is an author and creative writer. Although she was born and brought up in Manchester, UK, she has vivid childhood memories of the stories shared by her own grandmother about her surviving the partition of India. Her novel *Daughters of Partition* published in 2020 is the story of the life of the author's grandmother. This is a heart-rending and real-life tale of oppression, borders, loss, migration, religion and bravery told through the eyes of a woman who went through these experiences. This novel is a historical account of Taji Kaur, the author's grandmother who was a victim of the Indian partition. Taji Kaur, the sixteen-year-old girl has been living a happy and peaceful life in her paternal Sikh family in Lahore. She has been married to a Sikh young man and has her first baby. In 1947 she has become pregnant and expecting another baby. A line of partition is being proposed between India and Pakistan. In this background, Taji and her husband, Indian Sikhs, find themselves on the wrong side of the border. Riots, rapes, murders begin to happen due to the making of the partition between India and Pakistan. Taji and her Sikh husband struggle to cross a mountainous region to reach India.

Daughters of Partition begins with a meeting between Taji, now called Rasheed and one of the members of her long lost paternal house Balminder after a long gap of time. This sudden arrival of Balminder at Taji or Rasheed's house at Leicester of England brings Rasheed to her own past when she was Taji Kaur in Lahore before the partition of India. Taji was at first married to Gurbul and Taji was treated in Gurbul's family very well. Taji asks: "He (Gurbul) was my friend, my best friend. And once Rajendar Arrived our world become even more fulfilled with our daughter" (Raja 39). The second chapter of the first part of the novel most significantly and elaborately describes the grand marriage ceremony of Taji in Lahore in 1945, before the Indian partition. In the first chapter of the second part of the novel, the location of Taji's story is Mirpur of Punjab and time is 1945. Here Taji is seen as a happy wife in her husband's house: "I feel so blessed with all I have: Gurbul as my husband, both of you as parents, the new house now, the baby on its way. I don't know what I've done to deserve all this" (Raja 58). The second part of the novel, on the one hand, depicts Taji's happy living with her husband and their Muslim and Hindu friends and acquaintances in

Mirpur, Punjab during 1945-1947, and on the other, the growing agitation in their place and other parts of India owing to the news of the partition of India by the British. The fourth chapter of the second part of the novel describes the violence and bloodshed caused by the communal riots occurring in Mirpur, Taji's living town: "There was a heading in Dawn newspaper, 'No Muslim left alive within 300 square miles' " (Raja 129). The Sikh, Hindu and Muslim people around Taji live together and discuss the communal riots destroying human lives.

Taji's story in the fifth chapter demonstrates the havocs caused in Mirpur town because of the communal riots. Fozia Raja has presented the cruelties of men during the time of communal riots taking place just before and during Indian partition through the remembrances of Taji. Taji has been forced to leave her husband's house in Mirpur: "This was the house Garpul and I had lived in after our marriage, where Rajendar was born sixteen months earlier and where I had conceived our second child, almost nine months ago; everything I possessed was in that home. How could we just leave it?" (Raja 145) Once Taji left her father's house after her marriage and now she has been compelled to leave her husband's house due to the riots caused by the spreading of the news of India's partition. This double dislocation has made Taji's condition worse and miserable. She suffers bitter experiences of displacement and traumatic experiences of murders and bloodshed caused by the partition related communal riots. As a woman Taji undergoes severer and crueler experiences. The fifth chapter of the second part of the novel is located in Mirpur and the time is August 1947. It is about the growing tension and violence in Mirpur along with the other parts of India. The Sikh couple, Taji and her husband Garpul, is trying to escape from the agitated area taking their daughter Rajendar with them as Mirpur falls within the boundary of Pakistan as per the Indian Independence Act 1947. Taji, her husband and her daughter have joined a group under the guidance of soldiers to go to India crossing a mountainous region: "We were not choosing to leave in the quest for a better life or opportunity, but we were all being forced out" (Raja 151). On the way to cross the border Taji has given birth to a son and afterwards she has been forced to leave the baby at a deserted place due to some problems and objections from the people of her group. This separation of Taji from her child has caused agony and trauma to her mind; and it remains as an indelible and permanent memory for her. Taji has lost her husband too when they have been caught by some Muslim people in the mountainous region. Garpul, Taji's husband has been slaughtered like an animal by the Muslim rioters. Other Sikh male members of Taji's group have been killed in a barbaric way. Some girls have been raped too. Taji and her companion Kareena have been converted to Islam and given the names Rasheed and Khadeeja; Rajinder, Taji's daughter is given the name Zainub. Taji is forced to marry Asaff, a Muslim young man: "They didn't ask me if I wanted to marry Asaff, this stranger being imposed on me" (Raja 207). After being converted into Islam, Taji is forced into a marriage to a Muslim man. Taji admits: "This was the beginning of a new life, a life I did not want. I had become a prisoner" (Raja 213).

Taji, the protagonist of Fozia Raja's *Daughters of Partition* has felt severe trauma. She has seen murders and bloodshed during the communal riots resulting from the Indian partition. The theory of trauma has been an important issue for many scholars for many years. The

word 'trauma' has been analyzed by many theorists too: "...the Greek *trauma*, or 'wound', originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body. In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud's text the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth 3). Theorists like Cathy Caruth, Judith Lewis Herman who work upon trauma think that while there is absence of coherency and control over life and body of the victims, trauma occurs (Mohanram 918). Women lose control over their bodies and lives during the partition of India. Rapes, abduction, oppression, naked parade on streets have taken place frequently in large numbers before, during and after the partition. Men of one religion inflict oppression and torture upon women of another religion. Here, gender and religion play a crucial role. *Daughters of Partition* presents the feelings of trauma not only of the protagonist Taji but also those of her daughter and of other women who were trying to leave Pakistan and to go to India for safety and security. Bapsi Sidhwa, the Pakistani novelist, has highlighted the sufferings and plights of the marginalized in respect of gender and religion against the backdrop of the partition of India in *Ice Candy Man* (1988). Partition changes the identity of people: "It is sudden. One day everybody is themselves – and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian" (Sidhwa 93). Women were affected much more in comparison to men by the partition of India and their suffering and anguish were recorded in Sidhwa's novel. The condition of the abducted women during and after the Indian partition has been well depicted in *Ice Candy Man* through the story of Lenny's Ayah, who has been kidnapped, physically and psychologically wounded and compelled to become a dancing girl in an ill-reputed building. Butalia rightly comments: "The history of Partition was also the history of widespread sexual violence, particularly rape, abduction, forced marriage, selling into prostitution" (xxvi). In Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, the identity of Ayah shifts from the Hindu Shanta to the Muslim Mumtaz. Forced religious conversion, rape, abduction, torture – all weapons have been used to cause sufferings and miseries to the partition victims and especially to women. In Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*, Pooro, a Hindu girl is abducted by a Muslim young man. When Pooro succeeds to escape from her abductor's place and reaches her own parental house, her parents refuse to accept her. Pooro is then converted into Islam and is married to his Muslim abductor and is given the name Hamida. However, Pooro is a helpless character in Pritam's novel. She is oppressed by the people of other community and gets shock from her own parents. It is another form of oppression; it causes trauma to Pooro. She accepts a Muslim young man as her husband because of her parents' refusal and she gradually becomes alienated from her parents. Pooro suffers from identity crisis and helplessness. Pooro or Hamida in Pritam's novel *Pinjar* says: "it was a crime to be born a girl" (Pritam 87). Like Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* and Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*, Fozia Raja's *Daughters of Partition* reflects different aspects of the gender-based oppression and violence just before, during and just after the Indian partition. *Daughters of Partition* has explored the issue of gender-based oppression on the one hand, and has thrown light on the struggles of women to survive and overcome the losses of various types. Taji or Rasheed ultimately accepts her Muslim husband because of his sincere love and caring attitude towards Taji.

Conclusion

The partition of India is a tragic event and it bears a far-reaching and devastating impact upon the lives of the people of the Indian subcontinent. Long after that partition people bear the unhappy and traumatic experiences of the partition. Women's suffering, trauma, and sad memories continue to be depicted by several authors in their narratives. In terms of severity and dimension, women have suffered more than men because of the gendered based violence and oppression during the partition. Rape, abduction, forceful religious conversion, dislocation of women because of the Indian partition cannot be ignored or overlooked. Raja's novel *Daughters of Partition* records all these sorts of misery and suffering of women who have been the victims of the Indian partition. The novel conveys the message that the memories of suffering, oppression and loss and traumatic feelings cannot be erased from the minds of the women victims of the partition holocaust. The memories of the partition victims even go on to the next generations. In *Daughters of Partition*, the novelist, therefore, revives and narrates the first-hand experiences of her grandmother who is a direct victim of the Indian partition.

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