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Fiction as Creative Reflections of History: Gendered aspect of the Partition in Selected Narratives by three Women Writers

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Abstract

Women's writing as a discrete area of literary studies is based on the notion that the experience of women, historically, has been shaped by their gender, and so women writers by definition are a group worthy of separate study. "Their texts emerge from and intervene in conditions usually very different from those which produced most writing by men." (Virginia Blain, Isobel Grundy and Patricia Clements ed. The Feminist Companion to Literature in English, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990, viii-ix). It is not a question of the subject matter or political stance of a particular author, but of her gender: her position as a woman within the literary space. Women's writing came to exist as a separate category of scholarly interest relatively recently. In the West, the second wave of feminism prompted a general reevaluation of women's historical contributions, and various academic sub-disciplines, such as women's history and women's writing, developed in response to the belief that women's lives and contributions have been underrepresented as areas of scholarly interest. The partition of India is a signal event in world history and not merely in the history of the Indian subcontinent. The bulk of the scholarly literature on the partition has focused on the political processes that led to the vivisection of India, the creation of Pakistan, and the "accompanying" violence. Scholarly attention has been riveted on the complex negotiations, and their minutiae, leading to partition as well as on the personalities of Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah and others. The significance of the contribution of women writers to the bulk of Partition literature lies in the fact of their being able to address creatively the ellipses of history, which usually get subsumed or deflected in the meta/ male narratives, by exploring the effects of partition on women, their consciousness and subjectivity through exploring alternative histories and in the process situating fiction as a creative counterpart of history. This paper aims an attempt to revisit the event by focusing on female narratives.

Keywords: Women's writing, literary studies, gender, literary space, partition of India

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Women's writing as a discrete area of literary studies is based on the notion that the experience of women, historically, has been shaped by their gender, and so women writers by definition are a group worthy of separate study. "Their texts emerge from and intervene in conditions usually very different from those which produced most writing by men." (Virginia Blain, Isobel Grundy and Patricia Clements ed. The Feminist Companion to Literature in English. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990, viii-ix). It is not a question of the subject matter or political stance of a particular author, but of her gender: her position as a woman within the literary space. Women's writing came to exist as a separate category of scholarly interest relatively recently. In the West, the second wave of feminism prompted a general reevaluation of women's historical contributions, and various academic sub-disciplines, such as women's history and women's writing, developed in response to the belief that women's lives and contributions have been underrepresented as areas of scholarly interest. The widespread interest in women's writing developed alongside, influenced, and was influenced by, a general reassessment and expansion of the literary canon.

The partition of India is a signal event in world history, not merely in the history of the Indian subcontinent. The bulk of the scholarly literature on the partition has focused on the political processes that led to the vivisection of India, the creation of Pakistan, and the "accompanying" violence. Numerous people have attempted to establish who the "guilty" parties might have been, and how far communal thinking had made inroads into secular organizations and sensibilities. Scholarly attention has been riveted on the complex negotiations, and their minutiae, leading to partition as well as on the personalities of Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, Azad, Patel, and others, and a substantial body of literature also exists on the manner in which the boundaries were drawn between India and Pakistan, on the western and eastern fronts alike. (In general, however, the partition in the Punjab has received far more scholarly attention than the Bengal partition.)

Whatever the "causes" of the partition, the brute facts cannot be belied: down to the present day, the partition remains the single largest episode of the uprooting of people in modern history, as between 12 to 14 million left their home to take up residence across the border. In recent years, the scholarly literature has taken a different turn, becoming at once more nuanced as well as attentive to considerations previously ignored or minimized. There is greater awareness, for instance, of the manner in which women were affected by the partition and its violence, and the scholarship of several women scholars and writers in particular has focused on the abduction of women, the agreements forged between the Governments of India and Pakistan for the recovery of these women, and the underlying assumptions — that women could scarcely speak for themselves, that they constituted a form of exchange between men and states, that the honor and dignity of the nation

was invested in its women, among others — behind these arrangements.

There was a time, not long ago, when scarcely any attention was paid to the partition. Perhaps some forms of violence and trauma are better forgotten: the partition had no institutional sanction, unlike many of the genocides of the twentieth century, and the states of Pakistan and India cannot be held accountable in the same way in which one holds Germany accountable for the elimination of Europe's Jews. It is also possible to argue that the partition theme gets displaced onto other forms of expression. But it can scarcely be denied that now, more than ever, it has become necessary to adopt several different approaches to the partition, taking up not only the questions covered in the more conventional historical literature — the events leading up to the partition, the ideology (indeed pathology) of communalism, and the immediate political consequences of the partition — but also the insights offered by film, literature, memoirs, and contemporary political and cultural commentary. Of course, the consequences of partition are there to be seen: India and Pakistan continue to be embroiled in conflict, and Kashmir remains a point of contention between them. The psychic wounds of partition are less easily observed, and we have barely begun to fathom the myriad ways in which partition has altered the civilization histories of South Asia. If the partition appeared to some to vindicate the idea of the nation-state, to others the partition might well represent the low point of the nation-state ideology. It will probably take a long period for the people of South Asia to leave behind their partitioned selves.

Partition of the Indian subcontinent impacted women in many ways. But their experiences have been generally subsumed or deflected in the meta/male narratives. Some recent feminist interventions have addressed the ellipses of history by exploring the effects of partition on women's consciousness and subjectivity through alternative histories. The present study analyses the historiography of Partition in three selected novels of Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and attempts to examine these writings as agential voices of the assertive 'other' working through 'parallel' strategies to approximate the 'reality' of Partition. The study explores the interstices of history by foregrounding the marginal in a comparative mode.

'Events during and after partition are to this day very painful to me. And now, in my old age, the strength of my roots is strong; it also causes pain, because it makes one a 'stranger' everywhere in the deeper area of one's mind and spirit except where one was born and brought up.'

The given reflection was made by Attia Hosain, born to a Muslim family in 1913 in Lucknow, whose fictional responses to the partition of India, a subjectively experienced event that survived not only in her memory but also remained a living experience, records the affect and attachment of the author to the 'territory'

and its painful dissolution. She had left the country following the fateful event and passed the remaining years far away from the two divided parts as 'in spite of her ideals and those of many other Muslims in India, Partition proved inevitable at independence.' The feeling of loss, anguish and trauma of partition of the 'homeland' and corresponding destabilizing of 'territoriality' that entails a state of attachment, a lasting psychological connectedness, a sense of longing and belonging, recurrently inform Attia Hosain's writings.

Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) is an account of Attia Hosain's experiences and remembrances of a fateful event that created havoc in the Indian subcontinent. In the beginning of this novel, Anita Desai, in her 'Introduction' bents on anatomizing the author's inclination towards an unbiased representation of the prelude to 1947 partition of India till consequential effect. The picture of the undivided India has been imagined and drawn by Attia Hosain in the novel appears somewhat chimerical when viewed against the contemporary milieu. Hosain spent her childhood in Lucknow and intended to have her higher education abroad like her brothers. However, family conventions prevented her from doing so and she manifested her revolutionary zeal in marrying her cousin against her family's wishes. She has been familiar with the political atmosphere of the society due to her father's as well as father-in-law's active involvement in politics. Like her mother-in-law, who was a right wing activist and believed that Muslim leaders should remain in India instead of going to Pakistan and look after the interests of Muslims in India. Even Hosain's ideology was similar to her mother-in-law's; however, she could not sustain the ideology. After independence and partition, in spite of staying in India or moving out to Pakistan she rather preferred to take her flight to England along with her children. She found that her ideologies, like many Muslims in India to prevent the partition turned futile. Finding that her ideology of seeing an absolutely free India in the index of either of the two newly countries is impossible, she decided to go to England.

Hosain's sense of loss lies inherent in the loss of the intrinsic values of life, tradition, customs, family and society. Sitting in 1961, Hosain nostalgically paints the picture of north India before partition. She incorporates the spectacular theme of partition within the framework of a Muslim *Taluqdar* family living in Lucknow. The decline of the microcosmic world of 'Ashiana' is also a miniature of the greater demonstration of the loss of composite culture and tradition of the whole of India.

Attia Hosain's narrator-heroine Laila reveals the trauma of partition through her memories and insights of her disintegrating Taluqdar family. Laila's memory serves as an alley through which a journey into the disturbed psyches has been undertaken in the novel. She is born during the thirties when the atmosphere of the undivided India was charged up with manifold activities. The novel begins in

the 1930s, a period of great political and social upheaval in the Indian history. Attia Hosain's choice of Lucknow as the setting is an instance that partition had its repercussions in places far from the Eastern or Western frontier. The novelist attempts in showing through the microcosmic world of a single family, a greater degree of loss suffered by the entire subcontinent in the throes of partition. The trauma was evident in Laila's realization of the failure of the dreams. She talks to Asad, "we had dreamed when we were young of independence; he was now part of it with all its undream – of reality – its triumphs and defeats, its violent aftermath, the breaking-up of our social order, the slow emergence of another" [p. 318]. The struggle of Laila, a thoughtful young woman from a conservative Muslim society in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, like that of Attia, was also a fight for independence 'against the claustrophobia' in predominantly gendered territories.

The women of the diverse groups were among the greatest victims of religious and cultural persecution. Religious, ethnic, or political conflict between men on the subcontinent was often performed through acts of violence on the bodies of women. In order to realize the victimization of women during partition, it is pertinent to explore the gender's position in a patriarchal-colonial society prior to the annexation of Pakistan. By examining both the vulnerability of Muslim and Hindu women in the British Raj's Punjab in 1947, one can discern the gender roles for women in that era. Purdah, or "the seclusion and segregation of women was a cultural norm on the Indian sub-continent, amongst both Hindus and Muslims."

Purdah, beginning at puberty, controls the interaction between females and males. Many degrees of Purdah exist — from wearing a head scarf to living sequestered in the family home. Among the two basic types practiced on the Indian subcontinent even today, are, the one which allows women to move about encased in cloak-like garb disguising the entire body and face and only a net over the eyes permits visibility. This covering is known as the Burqa, the other form of Purdah physically confines women within the home. These forms of Purdah were enforced all over northern India during the nineteenth and early twentieth century — even Punjab being no exception. "Purdah, more than any other social institution, is an important indicator of the role women are expected to play in society." Because the practice of Purdah at that time required women to be confined to the home, it is apparent that women's exclusive role in society was that of procreation and domestic chores. What is known as "purdah" on the Indian sub-continent is understood as "hijab" in the Muslim world. In Arabic, hijab means curtain. According to Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, this term is used in the Koran both metaphorically and literally (as in *Tafhim al-Qur'an - The Meaning of the Qur'an* from englishtafsir.com). One well-known location for instructions for 'hijab' is located in Shura 33, Verse 59 of the Holy Koran. Sayyid Abul also asserts that "the instruc-

tions are for the women of the *believers* to distinguish themselves from the non-believers by observing hijab." One translation explains: 'O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, so that they may be recognized and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful.'

'Women's bodies were seen as property of the men of their family and the religion they practiced': this concept proves quite significant in the context of the religious atrocities committed during partition. Women's bodies constituted a religious, geographic, and familial symbol. Defilement of the woman of a family would be the greatest dishonor the family unit could endure — and thus violence enacted on women during partition was tantamount to a sacrilege against one's religion, country, and family.

Set in the context of Partition of India, Bapsi Sidhwa in her acclaimed novel *Cracking India* seeks to explore women's complex roles in the religiously fragmented society as she delicately threads the story of an 8 year old girl named Lenny with the din of violence ready to crash around her world as the Partition moves from political planning into reality. The story is told in the present tense as the events unfold before the young girl's eyes, though moments of an older Lenny looking back are apparent. Like Sidhwa, Lenny is stricken with polio, lives in Lahore, and is a Parsi.

In *Cracking India*, Ayah, Lenny's nanny, is a character Sidhwa develops to portray this sexual tension among Hindu women and "outside" men. Lenny describes Ayah's figure as having a "rolling bouncy walk that agitates the globules of her buttocks under her cheap colorful sari and the half-spheres beneath her short sari blouses" (p. 13). Ayah's sexuality attracts men of varying occupations and religions including the Fallattis Hotel cook, the Government House gardener, the butcher, Masseur, the "Chinaman", the Pathan, and Ice-Candy-Man (p. 81). According to Lenny, "Ayah's presence galvanizes men to mad sprints in the noon heat" (p. 41). As a lower caste servant for a Zoroastrian family, Ayah is not subject to the strict laws of Purdah required of the upper caste Brahmins. This position enables Sidhwa to portray in her novel more interaction between a Hindu woman and men of other beliefs. However, it also serves to register the extent of Ayah's decline in the final third of the novel. Once she was able to consolidate all religious groups, "Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsee, are, as always, unified around her"; however, partition turns Ayah's sexuality against her (p. 97). The men who once competed for her attention eventually reject her. In contrast with Ayah's alluring nature, Lenny's godmother appears quite asexual. According to Lenny, "She wears only white khaddar saris and white khaddar blouses beneath which is her coarse bandage-tight bodice. In all the years I never saw the natural shape of her breasts" (p. 13). Practices like purdah and hijab desexualize women's

bodies in order to shield them from sexual violence. In the novel, Lenny's godmother neutralizes her own sexuality by binding her breasts, which also shields her from physical harm but, along with her religion, age, and social status in the community, enhances her power. Although many Western thinkers believe these practices of veiling women to be repressive, Sidhwa suggests otherwise. Lenny's godmother suppresses her sexuality to become dominant over her husband and other men in the community like Ice-Candy- Man. Conversely, Ayah, who accentuates her sexuality, is kidnapped and defiled during partition.

Power-playing and politics among this collection of political leaders is purposefully vague and confusing in Sidhwa's novel simply because it was confusing to the people of India at the time. Lenny complains of Ice-Candy-Man's political comments, 'Sometimes he quotes Gandhi, or Nehru, or Jinnah, but I'm fed up with hearing about them. Mother, Father and their friends are always saying: Gandhi said this, Nehru said that. Gandhi did this, Jinnah did that. What's the point of talking so much about people we don't know?'(p. 38). Because, Lenny is a child during partition, the reader receives information filtered through an immature perspective.

It is significant to mention, in conjunction with politics, that Lenny and her family are Zoroastrian and thus somewhat removed from the religious violence and tension that ensues. Colonel Bharucha exclaims at a community meeting of Zoroastrians, "Let whoever wishes rule! Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian! We will abide by the rules of their land...We will cast our lot with whoever rules Lahore" (p. 48). This statement suggests that Zoroastrians, an extremely small religious community, accepted whatever ruling power dominated them. Interestingly, no Zoroastrian women in Sidhwa's text are victimized because of religious persecution during partition. Thus, her book is a penetrating analysis of the atrocities that major religions of the world inflict upon one another.

Historians have seen India's partition in the context of a horrific political upheaval between the British Raj, the Congress, and the All India Muslim League. Unfortunately, the greatest victims of partition, women, have been left without a voice - largely ignored in light of political events leading to partition. According to scholars Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, the story of 1947, while being one of the successful attainments of independence, is also a gendered narrative of displacement and dispossession, of large-scale and widespread communal violence, and of the realignment of family, community and national identities as a people were forced to accommodate the dramatically altered reality that now prevailed.

The end of British dominion and the creation of two separate, religiously identified states became a recipe for violence among the people. The two-nation theory brought the problem of minorities into

greater prominence than ever before, and partition, instead of offering a solution, made it even more difficult and more complicated. No matter where the line of demarcation was drawn, there would be Hindus, Muslim0s, and Sikhs on either side of it, in a majority or in a substantial minority; and, whatever the geographical boundaries of Pakistan, large numbers of Hindus and Sikhs would, overnight, become aliens and foreigners in their own homes.

All over the now divided territory, people were in frantic flight in fear of religious violence and persecution. Homes, crops, and animals were abandoned as people fled to the cities in search of safety in large numbers. The partition itself and the days immediately following the actual decree are called the "August Anarchy," a phrase which emphasizes the chaos that ensued among native people.

Obviously, the Partition of India in 1947 amounted to undeclared civil war, a dispute over borders, boundaries, culture and religion. Caravans of families were attacked simply because of their religious affiliation. The countless rapes and kidnappings of women and young girls are perhaps among the most sordid tales of partition. These females, some with children in their arms, were reportedly abducted, raped and molested, passed from one man to another, bartered and sold like cheap chattel.

Only when the British evacuated did Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs turn on each other and women's bodies became the battleground on which these factions clashed. Ayah's sordid tale is a reflection of that. Ayah is kidnapped and forced to marry Ice-Candy Man, a Muslim, while she is Hindu. The fact that Ayah is forced to prostitute her body and coerced into having sex with Ice-Candy Man indicates that women's bodies have historically become territory in which men act out their aggression. Perhaps Ice-Candy Man's abduction and defilement of Ayah may be seen as a gesture of contempt against India, Hindu men, and Hindu property. Menon and Bhasin suggest, "The most predictable form of violence experienced by women, as women, is when the women of one community are sexually assaulted by the men of the other, in an overt assertion of their identity and a simultaneous humiliation of the other by "dishonoring" their women." (p.5)

The macabre act of disfigurement is sordidly depicted in *Cracking India.* Ice-Candy Man reports to his friends that a train from Gurdaspur has arrived in Lahore filled with murdered Muslims. Ice-Candy Man shouts, "Everyone is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslim. There are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny-bags full of women's breasts!"(p.159). However, this act of violence against Muslim women only spurs him to perpetrate violence on Hindu and Sikh women. He exclaims, "I want to kill someone for each of the breasts they cut off the Muslim women" (p.166). And, of course, Ice-Candy Man satiates his appetite for revenge by kidnapping Ayah and

forcing her to marry him, while also prostituting her body.

In Sidhwa's novel, acts of violence against women are not limited to acts of religious hatred and xenophobia. Lenny's mother, a Zoroastrian, is a victim of the "will of men" as well. Lenny states, "Although Father has never raised his hands to us, one day I surprise Mother at her bath and see the bruises on her body" (p.224). Thus, Sidhwa reminds the reader that victimization and abuse of women does is not always occur in the context of warfare and religious hatred but in the daily course of domestic life. The forgoing depictions of violence against women are shockingly savage. These acts of brutality indicate what women's bodies symbolize for these religiously diversified groups. The appalling physical injuries inflicted on these women suggest that in this time and place the female body became territory to be fought over, conquered, and subsequently "branded" by the assailant through rape or disfigurement.

When cultural and religious brutality subsided, women continued to suffer nevertheless. Because of their defilement, some women were rejected by their families. Hamida, Lenny's new ayah, depicts a woman who has been besmirched and subsequently discarded by her family. Lenny's godmother informs Lenny that Hamida was kidnapped by the Sikhs. Godmother states, "She was taken away to Amritsar. Once that happens, sometimes, the husband - or his family - won't take her back....Some folk feel that way - they can't stand their women being touched by other men" (p.227).

Set around the time of partition, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) seeks to delineate the attempts of resistance against the construct of female body as male territory through the unfolding of the story of Virmati seen through the eyes of her daughter Ida, from whom her mother's past had always been kept a secret. In *Difficult Daughters*, her first novel, located primarily in the India of the 1940s, Kapur narrates the struggle and the repression of women in Indian society and in the process reveals her concept of independence. The search for control over one's destiny, surely the key theme of *Difficult Daughters*, refers not only to the Independence aspired to and obtained by a nation (despite its cruel division by a fateful Partition), but also to the independence yearned after (and finally not obtained) by a woman and member of that same nation (or of one of its rival communities).

Virmati, the heroine, seeks human relations that will allow her to be herself and to exercise the degree of control over her life which, as an educated woman, she knows she deserves. Born in Amritsar in the Punjab in 1940, the daughter of a father of progressive ideas and a traditionalist mother (Kasturi, obliged to give birth to no less than 11 children), she aspires to a freer life than that offered her by those around her. This aspiration is condemned to failure, thanks to the incomprehension she receives from both her own family and

that of the man she marries as well as due to her own choice.

Virmati, like so many other sub-continental women, is asked to accept a typical arranged marriage. She rebels against that destiny. Insisting on her right to be educated, she manages to leave home to study in Lahore. Nonetheless, she falls in love with an Amritsar teacher known as 'the Professor', a married man who first appears in her life as her parents' tenant. After a number of vicissitudes, including a period as a school principal in a small Himalayan state, she finally marries the man she loves (or thinks she loves), and returns to Amritsar to live with him. However, he refuses to leave his first wife, and the consequences for Virmati are harsh indeed: she ends up being marginalized by her own family and despised by her husband's. Virmati's tale is told, from a present-day perspective, by Ida, her only daughter, who seeks to reconstruct her late mother's life-story, against the background of the Independence movement of the 1940s and the subsequent trauma of Partition.

Virmati's married life with the Professor in Amritsar turns out to be a disaster. She wilts under the implacable and hostile gaze of Ganga, her husband's first wife, with whom she has to live. She loses all sense of identity: the continuation of her education (she studies for a higher degree in philosophy, but without enthusiasm) feeds no more dreams of independence. In the end, her individual history disappears and becomes all but irrelevant, swallowed up in the greater and more resonant collective tragedy of Partition.

At all events, it may be said that Virmati's frustrated life is, as it were, framed - as if in a triptych - by those two other, much more successful lives: those of Shakuntala and Swarna Lata, both emblematic of the educated, politicized and emancipated woman. In other words, the psychological annihilation of Virmati, at the hands of her own family and her husband's, should not be read as a fatality. What happens to Virmati is no doubt the most representative destiny of the Indian woman (even if educated), quantitatively or statistically, but Kapur's novel shows that other paths also exist, while further stressing that choices are by no means simple or either-or. There are types of female negotiation that work, and others that do not: but nothing is predetermined.

In this context, we may quote the perceptive comments of Dora Sales in : 'In this novel, one need to stress that the disjunction between the weight of gender-determined tradition, on the one hand, and the yearning for independence and self-affirmation, on the other, does not appear as a simple dichotomy of life-choices. In no case are things black and white. There is a whole range of complex emotional shades of grey between the two alternatives.' (p. 12)

However, it would be a mistake to devalue Virmati's struggle because she failed, for what mattered was to have made the attempt. Gur Pyari Jandial, Associate Professor, Department of English Dayal-

bagh Educational Institute, New Delhi correctly points out, in 'Evolving a Feminist Tradition: The novels of Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur': 'What is necessary is to break the patriarchal mould, and for Virmati to have tried to do that in the forties was a great achievement'. (p.3) *Difficult Daughters* is the story of a freedom struggle. While India fights for freedom from the British Raj, Virmati fights for the freedom to live life on her terms. In the throes of the struggle, she loses a part of herself and is torn in two halves. All this when India attains freedom, but at the cost of Partition; at the cost of losing half its soul. At the cost of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives, lost in the fire of communal hatred. India's success and failure is mirrored in Virmati's.

The significance of the contribution of women writers to the bulk of Partition literature lies in the fact of their being able to address creatively the ellipses of history, which usually get subsumed or deflected in the meta/male narratives, by exploring the effects of partition on women, their consciousness and subjectivity through exploring alternative histories and in the process situating fiction as a creative counterpart of history.

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