

A Gendered Nation: Indian Women Critics on Partition

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on finding the connecting link between gender and nation in narratives of Partition as written/studied by women. An (en)gendered reading of the nature of partition and the horrors afflicted on women facilitates a fair understanding of the position of women in the context of Partition. In addition, the paper explores how women have been eliminated from seizing the space with 'valour'. Furthermore, the paper highlights the importance of oral narratives in preserving the trauma and loss experienced by women during the times. Arguably, the paper, in its entirety takes into account the contribution of women critics in setting the stage for women to come in limelight with their first, second or third-hand experiences of the horrors of Partition. It is through women that a nation's progress can be measured while it is upon their male counterparts to allow them to claim their space. As a result, women create a stir of revolution when they speak for women who suffered in silence.

KEYWORDS

Nation, Partition, Gender, Violence, Gendered Nation

1. INTRODUCTION

What is a nation? Is it a merely political, historical and geographical construct, or is there more to the word – something beyond the Cambridge Dictionary's definition of it? According to Anderson, a nation is an 'imagined' community; it is, as per Benedict Anderson,

limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations ... It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm ... Finally, it is imagined as community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the Nation is always conceived as deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings ... [1]

Anderson's views have successfully garnered criticism from thinkers such as Slavoj Zizek, who believed that:

To emphasise in a 'deconstructionist mode' that Nation is not a biological or transhistorical fact but a contingent discursive construction, an overdetermined result of textual practices, is thus misleading: such an emphasis overlooks the remainder of some real, nondiscursive kernel of enjoyment which must be present for the Nation qua discursive entity effect to achieve its Ontological consistency. [2]

It is worth noting that nationality and gender are deeply interwoven, unstable aspects of one's identity that further turn into stable categories only after digressing from here and there. Here, this research brings to the fore, Tharu and Lalita's question about the nation – if women were to write the nation, were they also not a crucial part of it? This also means that, doesn't the nation also co-exist with women in the same reality? [3] To further understand the context and debates as aroused by Tharu and Lalita, it is imperative to read their collection of essays on Indian Literature. Although, the prime focus of this research does not lie in identifying the connecting link between gender and nation through literature; rather it tries to comprehend how various critics justify the existence of such an entity.

Harsh Trivedi, in this research writes about G.N Devy claiming that "he observes that Indian literary criticism is in such an utter state of bankruptcy because when it comes down to it, most Indian critics gravitate towards either imported Western aesthetic concepts or towards antiquated theories from Sanskrit poetics. In the process, they ignore totally our literary productions of the last thousand years, which have been in neither Sanskrit nor English but in the modern Indian languages, which are here called bhashas" [4]. However, we cannot deny the crucial idea behind these words and the attractiveness of them further lures us in believing the proposition. This paper, hence, investigates such discourses while trying to give a voice to as many critics as may seem possible.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ayesha Jalal, a well-known Pakistani historian, writes about Partition as "a defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, partition continues to influence how the peoples and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present and future" [5]. The only way to gain a closer perspective about the issue is to study the first-hand accounts of Partition through oral histories and lived experiences. But, studying such oral histories has its own limitation – by default, all the oral narratives are woven around men's experiences. Women's experiences never make it to the centre stage. To cut through the divide, Devika Chawla in her book, *Home Uprooted: Oral Histories of India's Partition*, interviews the victims of Partition – first, second and third generation – and delves deeper into the meaning of home and how they made a home for themselves in a foreign land. This book lays more emphasis on narratives of women who played the main role in overriding the "confines of feminine domesticity" [6]. Further, in the book, she implores that women's contributions are mostly demoted to the backfoot owing to the anxieties of their respective families due to their participation in caricaturing a national identity.

It is commonplace to understand that when historical narratives talk about women in relation to Partition, they most generally limit their experiences to that of mistreatment and humiliation whilst categorising them as survivors of dreadful times. Truillot, in this book, *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History* writes about the participation of humans in history as actors and narrators; he further mentions:

The inherent ambivalence of the word "history" in many modern languages, including English, suggests this dual participation. In vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both "what happened" and "that which is said to have happened." The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociopolitical process, the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process [7]

There are numerous instances of the portrayal of national consciousness from the point of view of Indian male writers as well. But, to fulfil the motive behind the topic, this research would largely focus on Indian women writers specifically.

3. DISCUSSION

It wasn't long before we realised that women writers have a solid potential to change the stream of dominant discourse, impelled by the betrayal caused due to the oppressive framework of societal structure. This research seeks to establish how women's writing is a staunch remark on the underlying masculinities within the framework of a nation while tightening the rope to create a safe space for the female voice to emerge from its cocoon with pride and dignity, the same as cherished by that of male writers, either native, diasporic, or expatriate. This burgeoning potential is the source of their wanting to respond and react on the concept of the Nation. Furthermore, it is noteworthy to examine how literature, even though fictional, could provide as a legitimate agency to understand the social, political, and cultural history while paving the way for intertextuality to understand a literary text. This research emphasises how women became the voice of the Nation – wrote for the Nation – and diverted the stream of dominant discourse towards themselves by being an essential part of it instead of limiting themselves to the position of a mute spectator.

Women have been structurally excluded from the nation-building talks per se because nations are considered to be masculine entities according to the narratives structured in the wake of post-coloniality. The concept of reimagining a nation's identity is therefore based on the social constructs of the participation of each gender in the phases of nation-building. According to Elleke Boehmer,

Gender has been, to date, habitual and apparently intrinsic to national imagining. . . . The production of a unified, homogeneous entity such as [the Nation] . . . hinges, to a large degree, on the determinate subject position of 'woman' for its articulation. . . . In short, national difference . . . is constituted through the medium of the sexual binary, using the figure of the woman as a primary vehicle. [8]

Women share an imbalance of power with their male counterparts in a domestic household which stems from the deeply ingrained mentality bound within the shackles of patriarchy and inter alia homogeneity in terms of caste and community. Their tryst with standing the ground is a vital factor behind the imbalance resulting from their unequivocal non-existence in matters of everyday living. The current research further highlights the importance of stories written by women sans being cast-away victims of the dominant discourse pertaining to gender. Sangeeta Ray's *Engendering India* is one such contribution that brings to light the "androcentric bias" in relation to the imagining of a modern nation. Ray also puts forth "the assumptions behind the masculinist, heterosexual economy hitherto governing the cultural matrix through which an Indian national identity has become intelligible" [9]. Although, there is no clear implication about how Ray wishes to establish the character of an 'authentic woman' who can and must bear the weight of producing a nation-state through her selection of the individual texts.

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent was a period of dramatic change for India, which witnessed human history's largest and most massive forced mass migrations [5]. Furthermore, the literature written during the partition period gives a major share of limelight to the men such as M.K. Gandhi, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Lord Mountbatten and others. All the narratives offer a clear insight into the men of those times while neglecting women's engagement in the issue because women's lived experiences fade away from reality owing to their abstract nature. Thus, the political world deems itself to be limited to experiences – lived, felt and brought forth by men. Women's voice offers a redefined version of the narrative of Partition. It helps us better understand the trauma associated with migration, loss and homelessness inflicted upon them due to the Partition. Apart from this, a major consequence of studying about the political separation of a nation through traditional historical narratives is that it leaves no space for the study of trauma or feelings of loss – the statistics can tell us about the number of individuals who were forced to leave their Nation. But no statistics or study can ever reveal anything about the hidden despair and loss experienced by the displaced families.

Reiya Bhat, in her thesis talks about interviewing female refugees who suffered through the Partition to gain a better understanding of their stance on engagement with politics. Her research helps us the larger picture from a microscopic perspective. Although she agrees that oral histories are not uniform in any way and cannot be bound within categories, nevertheless, these narratives can be woven together to form theories of feminism, gender and displacement. We can consider these feelings to be like those experienced by through the writings of women who have tried to depict the horrors of Partition through their narratives. Even though these narratives might not account for the first-hand experiences, but the feelings of fear, loss and uncertainty can be felt deeply through such works. Bhat goes on to say:

The women I interviewed were all young girls, teenagers, and young women when Partition happened. They remembered feelings of fear, loss, and uncertainty. They shared that they lost everything when they left their homes and the vast majority of them carried a few clothes and little else with them. Their families suffered and they faced various economic hardships. Yet, their stories of loss and sacrifice have contributed significantly to their worldviews. They do not vilify "the other side." They shared memories of the kindness of strangers and how people they did not even know gave them resources to help them survive [10].

It won't be wrong to say women have always been on the "receiving end of violence as victims", as highlighted by Butalia in her essay, which contains a passage written by an activist [11]. Dey claims that this passage is an eye-opener as women are settled within the cusps of violence and they have been forced with the roles of bearing "national integrity and unity" [12].

Violence is almost always instigated by men, but its greatest impact is felt by women. In violent conflict, it is women who are raped, women who are widowed . . . in the name of national integrity and unity . . . We women will have no part of this madness, and we will suffer it no more . . . Those who see their manhood in taking up arms can be the protectors of no one and nothing.

... communal confrontations are normally engineered and led by men. Women are often primary victims, having to bear the brunt of the effects of communal violence, whether it is rape or loss of male members of the family.... On the whole, women have rarely been active in communal riots and have a clear interest in avoiding them [11, pp. 34-35].

Butalia, in her essay, also brought forth a disheartening critique – common among men – on women who participated in the violence. According to men, women must not be labelled as violent beings; hence their actions are cast under the umbrella term 'valour', thereby sanctifying these acts of violence as heroic to keep women within their *aukat* of being non-violent beings [11, p. 43]. This statement is a remark on the set standards of a society wherein any deviation is ultimately made to succumb to sanctification.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As this paper nears its end, I would like to pose some questions: How do we measure recovery in women's experiences of the traumatic Partition? What kind of methodologies can we devise to study the current impact of a deeply ingrained silence within the first, second or third-hand oral narratives by women describing the events of Partition? Would analysing women's narratives – fiction, memoirs, diary entries – be sufficient to study more about the sacrifice of women from times immemorial? Would it be fair enough to sew our lips in silence for all the horrific humiliation faced by women in a nation? It would be interesting to search for the answers of these questions and to work on something similar in nature. In conclusion, it can be said that there's a thin line between linking gender and Nation with subtlety while not limiting this (re)imagined link to religious, cultural, political or historical contexts. The years following the Partition of our Nation can also be assumed to have been territorialising gender [13]. Furthermore, these narratives explain how womanhood was equated with silence amid the patriarchal winds of the partition era. While this research does not touch upon each and every aspect of linking gender and Nation in territorial terms, the critics featured in this research have been a source of inspiration for women all around the world who have been striving to maintain a fine balance in creating a space for while reassuring to not de-root the dominant culture. The scope for this research is to lead, not just researchers, but renowned academicians towards a better of how gender and nation are interrelated in the most intricate manner. Also, while this research dealt with women critics and did not dive into the world of Indian Literature, it will definitely motivate fellow researchers – interested in South Asian partition literature – to look at those texts written in *bhashas* as crucial narratives towards further strengthening the intricacy of nation and gender.

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