

PARTITION SHORT STORIES AND THE FACETS OF TRAUMA: A READING

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Abstract

Trauma studies focus on how deeply disturbing experiences affect individuals emotionally and alter their understanding of the world. These studies analyze how trauma is represented in literature and culture, especially in contexts involving violence, oppression, and historical upheaval. One such context is the Partition of India in 1947, which not only divided the land but also caused deep psychological divisions among people. This event led to the emergence of Partition literature, which reflects the pain, displacement, and chaos experienced by millions. In particular, short stories have effectively captured the emotional and social impact of Partition in a compact form. Writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Manik Bandyopadhyay, and Dibyendu Palit have portrayed different aspects of trauma in their stories, offering insight into the human cost of political division.

The paper tries to explore how the stories on the theme of Partition reveal various layers of Partition-induced trauma.

Key words: Partition, Trauma, Violence, Pain, Short Story.

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In trauma studies, trauma is “generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self’s emotional organization and perception of the external world. Trauma studies explores the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance” (Balaev 360). Scrutinizing the cultural context of individual or collective experiences of trauma enables more attention to representations of extreme experience such as rape, war, colonial oppression, and racism, etc. The geographical partition of 1947 was consequential in creating psychological shadow lines among people living on either side of the border between India and Pakistan. The physical partition has garnered a type of literature, namely partition literature, which takes into discourse different facets of partition-induced trauma experienced by the victims of it. The theme of partition and trauma comes into the arena of all literary genres in which writers register the upheavals of pre-and-post partition life in both the countries. Short story in its limited compass has often very pervasively caught a slice of life struggling amidst partition. Writers like Dibyendu Palit, Manik Bandyopadhyay and Saadat Hossain Manto have dealt with in their short stories different layers of trauma caused by partition. The paper tries to navigate into different shades of trauma geared by partition in some select short stories to evolve a comprehensive discourse on it.

Trauma's effects on the individual psyche in Cathy Caruth and the First Wave model are often analyzed to explore the individual experience of a collective traumatic event in a literary text, thus creating a bridge between the experience of an individual and a cultural group or between the personal and political worlds. In Dibyendu Palit's short story, "Alam's Own House", the trauma of partition is engraved in the memory of Raka whose last letter to Alam who is a victim alike of rootlessness expresses her helpless pain to lose her lover:

Alam tore open the top of the envelope and took out the folded piece of paper. It was Raka's handwriting "My commitment towards you was, I had thought, the same as your commitment towards me. But when I received your last letter and realized its meaning, everything seemed to turn upside down. When I asked myself, I found that I had been asking you to come because I knew that you couldn't! Your intentions are noble. You want to take me up to where you are. I am eternally grateful to you for that! But, Alam, I lack the mental strength required of me. There's a kind of resistance, a kind of hesitation-- something, somewhere. I cannot explain what it is. And I don't have the strength to break that wall. So there's need to make the wall higher. It was, because of this hesitation that our addresses had changed-- yours and mine. And many people's before us. But if that hesitation wouldn't have been there, we would probably never ever have had the opportunity to meet. And there would have been no need for this love-- the stringing of letters one after another. I wouldn't have had the strength to say these things, standing before a person as honest as you. So, I'm running away.

The language of this letter may sound somewhat romantic. Maybe that's because I truly love you. I'm running away because your love is stronger. Your pain will be much more than mine. If you can, forgive me. If you can, keep in touch. If you write, I'll surely respond. Besides, there are things in life that we know are illusions, yet we love to keep them alive. Don't we? (Palit 471-72)

The shattering state of Raka decodes her suffocated feeling and corroding memory which she cannot explain in language. In Freud's psychoanalytic theory of trauma, trauma is an extreme experience of unrepresentable suffering, an experience which fragments the psyche, and challenges the limits of language and even ruptures meaning altogether.

Mallika in Manik Bandyopadhyay's story "The Final Solution" represents one of the mother-women whose families had migrated from East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) to West Bengal in India, after the 1947 partition. Hers is one of the families which could not find refuge in the over-crowded camps. The helpless people settled in any places, including places like railway platforms. The traumatic situation of her life is sketched in the very opening paragraph of the story:

Even a few days ago one could see forlorn, dispossessed people, spending their days and nights, huddled together like herds of cattle and goats in the shelter of a railway platform. Mallika's family had a place, the length of a spread-out mattress. Everything, everyone was squeezed in there. Mallika, her husband Bhushan, their two- and- half-year- old son Khokon and her widowed sister-in-law Asha; tin suitcases, beddings, bundles, pots and pans. (Bandyopadhyay 23)

When Pramatha offers Mallika “some job” still available for women Mallika rightly guesses the risk. Yet, a look at her child who is “now reduced to a skeleton” makes her accept the offer as there is no other means open for them. It is the compulsion of maternal love that moves her to compromise her body and self-respect. As she says to her sister-in-law that she would be happily ready to die if that could keep her child alive. The moot question is why Mallika kills Pramatha when he makes sexual advances to her. It is true that she had accepted the fact that Pramatha was going to engage her in prostitution, but she could not digest the fact that he had planned to enjoy her first, before introducing her to the profession of a prostitute. She accepted it as a depersonalized but unavoidable act, but Pramatha's violation of her body is a betrayal of her trust in him. In her act of murdering Pramatha, she seems to reclaim the authority upon her body. She boldly challenges male supremacy, fatuously fights for her sexual freedom and manages to emancipate herself from the shackles of body politics. Before leaving Pramatha's room Mallika takes out bank notes from Pramatha's vest pocket and the money she takes represents the means of her “final solution”, as she says in the end, “we will never be hungry again...my son will have milk four times a day”(39). In fact, the act of murdering Pramatha empowers a woman like Mallika. She resolves to carry a knife when engaging with men. Any qualm of conscience that she might have felt is erased by the fierce mother-love that propels her to do so. The ending shows that Mallika confronts her traumatic life as a victim as well as a survivor who learns to withstand the ravages of a patriarchal world. Mallika makes an identity of her own self, of her own demand, disrupting the common concept of gendering partition: “Disenfranchised as sexual objects,

communal commodities, and patriarchal property, by both the nation-state and their relations, hundreds of thousands of South Asian women experienced multiple forms of gendered and sexual violence” (Daiya 65). In this context it may be worthwhile to observe what Balaev says about trans-historical trauma to suggest trauma’s essential or universal effects on consciousness and narrative: “Trauma is an unassimilated event that shatters identity and remains outside normal memory and narrative representation. Fragmentation or dissociation is viewed as the direct cause of trauma, a view that helps formulate the notion of trans-historical trauma, which suggests that trauma’s essential or universal effects on consciousness and narrative recall afford the opportunity to connect individual and collective traumatic experiences. Traumatic experience and its inherent dissociation thwart the application of determinate value to that experience because the level of fright destroys the mind’s ability to comprehend it and linguistically code it. Although the experience may never be narrated or identified clearly, it acts like a tumor in consciousness that wounds the self. The traumatic experience exerts a negative and frequently pathological effect on consciousness and memory that prevents the past from becoming incorporated into a life narrative” (363).

Saadat Hasan Manto's 1953 short story "Toba Tek Singh" posits a unique representation of trauma theory in the text through the character of the central protagonist, the lunatic Bishan Singh who experiences an ontological struggle between being and belonging. When Bishan, an inmate in a mental asylum, is about to be transferred to India because he is Sikh and he learns that his home village falls within Pakistan's territory, he tries to resist his

transfer to India. Bishan cannot cope up with the idea that by virtue of a historical event his identity has changed and he can no longer claim to have been an inhabitant of his home village, Toba Tek Singh, because of his identity of being a Sikh and because of the new border on the old map. The character of Bishan Singh defines in a new light the traumatic event of 1947 partition of British India through the figure of the border. The story focuses on the geographical border as a conceptual figure that divides an identity into a nationalistic framework of reference. The ending of Manto's story where "Toba Tek Singh" falls down and lies dead on a piece of nameless land between Pakistan and India is significant in the sense that the identity of a particular individual is subsumed in the context of the geographical partition of British India. Being unsure of the new location of his home village and being confused about the newly assigned national identity Bishan Singh's increasing disorientation hurls him into an existential crisis. Through the character of Bishan Singh, Manto pinpoints the trauma of rootlessness and loss of identity which cause the tragedy of character as one part of the wounded cartography of the sub-continent.

Jyoti, the protagonist in Lalithambika Antharajanam's short story, "A Leaf in the Storm", is a victim of the politics of female body which became a contested site on which the people of opposite religious communities were striving hard to script their own desires and authorities. Violation of female body tramples idealism associated with female body and reinvests it with symbols of a fallen and undignified nation. Jyoti had been raped along with other fifteen women while crossing the border with the help of her father's good friend, Qasim Sahib. Although Qasim Sahib and his daughter Ayesha,

Jyoti's friend, take great caution not to raise any suspicion even in Ayesha's brother who may prove untrustworthy now, the plan to send these women safely to India across the border fails. Jyoti is a victim of the gendered Partition. When the raped Jyoti reaches the Indian camp she is carrying the "seed of damnation" in her womb. Her belly looks big even though she hasn't had food for four days. In rage and disgust, she clenches her fist and aims at her belly. We may recall here two other women who are also the victims of partition, but their experiences are different. The old woman witnessed the violence, but her body was not raped as a site for the performance of identity because she was old and devoid of sexuality. On the other hand, another woman in the village not only witnessed the brutal killing of her husband and children, but was also raped. The violated female body turns to be a burden that caused several suicides during the Partition. Although Jyoti lives on, her suicidal tendency seems sometimes to be overpowering her and she stops eating anything even for four days at a stretch. This fasting has weakened her body and when the doctor makes entreaties to her to drink milk to save her life she breaks into tears and asks: "You want me to live on still, and sow the seed of damnation? ... My life...doctor...may I ask you something? Tell me, are you able to destroy something which must be destroyed, just as much you can preserve something you think must be preserved?" But she gradually overcomes the trauma of rape and adapts herself to the atmosphere of the camp. She tries to resist her persistent thinking about being a victim of gendered and nationalist violence. She feels that the more "natural" it is for her to live on and love the child.

Connecting the individual and collective experiences of trauma in the short stories discussed forwards the notion of, in the words of Balaev, trauma's universal effects upon identity and memory, particularly the "fragmentation or dissociation of consciousness. Dissociation and the inherent latency of trauma create a temporal gap in which the meaning and value of the experience are indeterminate" (Balaev 365). The emphasis in Cathy Caruth's model of trauma studies on the "intrinsic relationship" between the individual and cultural group as well as the dissociative and silencing effects of trauma continues in criticism. The trauma of a mother like Mallika or Jyoti, of a beloved like Raka, or of a disoriented Bishan Singh may be fitting cases for pluralistic model of trauma studies which suggests that traumatic experience unveils new relationships between experience, language, and knowledge that denote the social significance of trauma.

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