

The Violence of Memory Kashmiri Women's re-Narration of the Events of Partition

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Abstract—During India's partition in 1947, as Hindu, Muslim and Sikh mobs fought against one another, women became the symbolic and literal targets of communal violence. Muslim, Hindu and Sikh women were subjected to a range of sexual brutalities at the hands of rioting mobs during this time: "stripping; parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding the breasts and genitalia with triumphal slogans; amputating breasts; knifing open the womb; raping, of course; killing foetuses" (Menon and Bhasin, 43). Kashmir became a territory of communal violence during 1947. However, the historical emphasis of partition remained on Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal. Kashmir, on the other hand, was marginalized due to tales of these states occupying the central position within the literary framework. The patriarchal narratives during that time produce an optical blindness with regard to embodied violence against women. Through this paper, I attempt to analyse the narratives of Kashmiri women and understand their remembrance rituals and narrative practices through which the memory of historical violence is revived and retold. For understanding the role of memory and the effect of violence, I shall consider two books, "Kashmir 1947: A Survivor's Story" by Krishna Mehta and "Kashmir: the history and pandit women's struggle for identity" by Suneeti Bakshi. Through this paper, I shall also try to discuss the requirement of counter-narratives. The dominance of male narratives has been acknowledged in the patriarchal society. The goods had to unite and express their resentment against being the territories of violence and upholders of dignity in the society dominated by men (Luce Irigaray). These narratives by feminist authors counter the partitionist thinking that emphasises on existence of an essential difference between religious communities. By revealing the violent core of all communities, these counter-narratives defuse the oppositional rhetoric through which Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh, as well as India and Pakistan, continue to imagine themselves as different from the other.

1. INTRODUCTION

Salman Rushdie has coined the term "memory's truth" for that selective mode of recollection which "creates its own reality" around significant events and aims to store this subjective narrative in popular memory. This selective mode of narration marginalises weaker sections within the society since they are denied space for representation in the popular culture. Women, the socially weaker section, became literary and communal targets of violence during the politics and brutality of partition in 1947. Women had been the silent receivers of

violence at the hands of rioting mobs: "stripping; parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding the breasts and genitalia with triumphal slogans; amputating breasts; knifing open the womb; raping, of course; killing foetuses" (Menon and Bhasin, 43). Apart from these, another form of violence was being practiced, which had long remained unacknowledged, though highly visible in the social sphere during the days of Partition: the "sacrifice" of women by their families to protect family and community honour. Menon and Bhasin note that "so powerful and general was the belief that safeguarding a woman's honour is essential to upholding male and community honour that a whole new order of violence came into play, by men against their own kinswomen; and by women against their daughters or sisters and their own selves" (44). The survivors have often narrated that women were "poisoned, strangled or burnt to death, put to the sword, drowned." We are also aware of the fact that women were frequently burned, shot, or they strangled themselves and their daughters, ate opium and swallowed crushed glass in order to save the honour of their family. The idea that they were upholders honour of the family and community was embedded in their mental faculty by the patriarchal society. Feminist historians of the Partition have noted the staggering range of sexual brutalities faced by Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh women, and have opposed the preconceived notions regarding women and their roles. They have produced their own narratives to interrogate the popular re-telling and remembering of violence, brutality and deaths at the time of partition. The two texts considered here, "Kashmir 1947: A Survivor's Story" by Krishna Mehta and "Kashmir: The History and Pandit Women's Struggle for Identity" by Suneethi Bakshi present a counter narrative in order to question the patriarchal remembering of such killings as "martyrdom," "bravery," "duty," or "sacrifice" on the part of the women who died in these tragedies. These counter narratives by women are responsible for shedding the layers of selective narration and exposing the politics of construction of dominant ideology to mask the violent nature of truth during the period of Partition.

2. EXCLUSION OF KASHMIR FROM THE NARRATIVES OF PARTITION

The narratives of Partition were usually placed within the territorial boundaries of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab and West Bengal. Kashmir, a state of spectacular beauty, was brutally divided into two sections after Partition, one remained a part of India, while the other became Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. Kashmir Valley has always been presented as a “fetish for the nation-state,” generating a nationalist desire for the valley and its beauty. The stock image of the “shikara on the Dal Lake” has been integral to this fetishizing visual scheme since it represents the beauty of the valley. However, this image represents Valley's landscape, but prefers to eliminate Kashmiri natives, their homes, destruction of the territory, brutal invasions and bloodshed during the violent division of the state. The cover of Mehta's memoir and the back cover of Bakhshi's book, feature this familiar image of a shikara on the Dal Lake at sunset, “a clichéd signifier of the Valley.” The image presents Kashmir Valley as a “territory of desire,” which has become a distant notion after the space of desire was encroached by harbingers of violence. The shikara image has become a symbol not only for Kashmir, but also for the national yearning inspired by the Valley. The narratives discussed in the paper have already been embedded within this Indian nationalist desire for Kashmir. One can observe the technique of selective narration working in this production of “mimetic capital” that represents beauty of Kashmir. The stock image is devoid of struggle of Kashmiris, in order to keep up with the notion of desire for the territory. However, the covers themselves challenge this idea of segregation of trauma and aesthetic. The book cover of Mehta's narrative superimposes a beautiful woman in a sari on this backdrop the image symbolising the struggle of women to survive within the valley and their involvement within every day politics. On the other hand, Bakhshi uses a photograph of Kashmiri women wearing Pheran¹ and Taraga² representing the role of women in cultural production and their struggle for survival within a space from which their presence has been unacknowledged. The narratives by Kashmiri women challenge the popular and spectacular memorialization of the valley as the territory of desire and also represent what has been unacknowledged by the camera's gaze and cultural production, the brutality of everyday struggle and the violent nature of survival in the valley.

3. NARRATIVES OF WOMEN

Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak asserts “ideology is not a strict set of rules, but loosely articulated sets of historically determined and determining notions, presuppositions, and practices, each implying the other by real or forced logic, which goes by the name of common sense of self-evident truth or natural behaviour in a certain situation.” Literature and media play a crucial role in representation and popularisation of this dominant ideology. The popular narratives of partition

construct women's subjectivities through the categories of religion, class, and caste. Counter narratives by women expose this long-disavowed violence against women. Their identity and subjectivity has been derived through their social positions, and their positions within the family and community colour their narratives of trauma and struggle. The narratives by Mehta and Bakhshi interrogate this construction of identity of women by the patriarchal society. The re-telling of events of Partition exhume the political nature of narration by exposing the formation of subjectivity through dominant ideals of the society. The selective nature of production of literature by emphasising on certain regions, recording the perspective of male members, and discarding the tales of suffering of women reflects the strategy of concealing the real situation to maintain the element of façade regarding the beauty of Kashmir and the nationalist yearning for the territory.

“Kashmir 1947: A Survivor's Story” written by Krishna Mehta, narrates the events that happened in Kashmir in 1947. She is the wife of a civil servant Duni Chand Mehta, and later was herself a nominated to the Lok Sabha as the first female Member of Parliament from Kashmir. Mehta's memoir gives an account of attacks in Muzaffarabad (now in Pakistan) in October 1947 and is known for its evocative account of experiences of women during the days of Partition. Mehta had moved to Muzaffarabad from Srinagar only a few months earlier with her husband, the district commissioner of Muzaffarabad. Her husband was murdered after the raider's attack. The memoir narrates her experience of being on the run to cross into the new India with six children in her charge. Mehta's memoir is a personalized account, by a woman, of the fallout of the Partition in Kashmir, a region that has been marginalized by historical emphasis on regions like Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Punjab, even as Kashmir remains solidly lodged in nationalist remembrance of 1947. Mehta's memoir attempts to fracture the category of “women's accounts” of Partition and make explicit the intersectionality of gendered subjectivity with communal belonging and citizenship. This would allow one to place these “women's accounts” not only against “men's accounts” but also to place them as counter narratives to the secular yet implicitly Hinduized accounts that describe the formation of India. Mehta has used the familiar trope of Ramayana and placed her tale within the mould of the epic. The elements of absent husband, the arrival of marauders at her unguarded home, and the abduction of a woman who “never yielded” and survived the ordeals with her virtue intact. Mehta uses the mould of a Hinduized text to shed light on the lack of representation of women and expose the marginalisation of the weaker sections by their stronger counterparts. The memoir appears as a challenge to dominant accounts of patriarchal narration and selective re-telling of experiences of violence. The narrative attempts to interrogate the popular idea of brutality and exclusion of women from the narratives of suffering during times of Partition. Krishna Mehta questions what has been

embedded in our memory as the definition of violence and her experience makes us understand the politics behind narration and representation in the popular media.

While Mehta's narrative is situated within the space of violence and brutality endorsed during Partition, Suneethi Bakhshi chose to write about the culture of Kashmiri Pandits, the role of women in cultural production and transmission, and the trauma of alienation faced by the natives along with destruction of indigenous beliefs due to partition and changes that came along with it in the Valley. The book serves as a cultural guide as it elucidates on festivals, rituals, and traditions followed the Kashmiri Pandit community. She aims to acquaint the reader with the indigenous culture of the community, which has been endangered due to foreign invasions and introduction of newer institutions post Partition of the territory. She starts by introducing the reader with Rajatragini³, a chronicle of the kings of Kashmir. Through recounting the origin of the community as descendants of Saraswat Brahmins, and further presenting the Rajatragini, she counters the popular belief regarding the lack of history of the community. Along with this chronicle, Bakhshi also narrates the tale of Kota Rani⁴, Lalleshwari⁵ and other women who struggled to restore the lost glory of the Valley, but have been lost in the pages of history due to politics of representation. She narrated the position of Shaivism⁶ and its believers during the periods of different rulers like Mir Dynasty, Mughals, Afghans, Sikhs, Dogra rulers, Maharaja Pratap Singh and Maharaja Hari Singh. The culture and various institutions had undergone several modifications to adapt to different ideologies and beliefs propagated by different rulers during their reign. Although the cultural milieu modified several times to adapt to the situation, the community maintained its faith in the principles of Shaivism and followed the rituals and traditions devised by their cultural institutions. Women played a vital role in educating their children and making them aware of the indigenous practices, customs and rituals. They were responsible for transferring their beliefs to their children and making them aware of the native customs. Bakhshi successfully acquaints her reader with complexity and diversity of the social, political and cultural position of the community. However, as one reaches closer to chapters dealing with Partition, one realises the author's emphasis shifts from staunch position of natives to alienation and atomization faced by natives during turbulent times. The events of Partition led to dispersal and forced movement of natives due to formation of newer territorial boundaries and social institutions that replaced the established ideas rapidly. However, Bakhshi also sheds light on contribution of women to community and society post diaspora and pain of partition. Young girls and women volunteered to form and join Women's Militia to engage themselves in a wide range of activities- social, political, humanitarian and cultural. Bakhshi's narrative moves smoothly from presenting the established position of the native community of Kashmir to making one aware of the

alienation faced by the community, especially the women, and further narrating the struggle of Pandit women to re-establish their place within the social sphere. Through gradual shifts Bakhshi subverts various beliefs established within popular memory like lack of history of Kashmiri Pandits and expose the politics of narration by highlighting the lack of space for representation of women's accounts of their struggle during Partition. Narratives by Mehta and Bakhshi aim to re-tell the trauma of Partition from the perspective of women and produce counter-narratives to challenge the popular ideas existing within memory of the masses due to politics of representation.

4. PRESENT DAY POLITICS

Sara Ahmed argues, "To track what texts do, we need to follow them around. If texts circulate as documents or objects within public culture, then our task is to follow them, to see how they move as well as how they get stuck." Consideration of a text as a part of the popular culture depends significantly on the political dynamics of the present scenario. Narration of an event after it has happened is always coloured within the dominant ideology of the present. Re-telling of narratives around partition involve re-creation of events by placing them within the social, political, cultural and humanitarian beliefs of the present. Priya Kumar asserts that every text demands to be read in terms of the politics of the present. The recent reappearance of narratives by Mehta and Bakhshi, after almost three decades, indicates a renewed interest in understanding the experience of partition. The fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence occasioned an energetic reflection on the legacy of 1947 in journalism, fiction, publishing, and cinema. Moreover, the interest has shifted towards understanding the brutality and violence from perspectives of the marginalized sections. The sections that had been oppressed and denied space for representation earlier are narrating their experiences. The goods are uniting to produce counter-narratives and subvert the popular beliefs. The literature of Partition produced by these two Kashmiri Pandit women highlights the lack of inclusion of accounts of Kashmiri women's struggle and trauma in the popular narratives of Partition. The emphasis on "men's accounts" of certain regions is exposed, and in turn one is able to understand the politics surrounding the events of 1947. Counter narratives play a crucial role in interrogating the dominant ideas, circulated via different media, and challenge the ideology propagated by the ruling class by presenting another contradictory narrative that subverts the popular beliefs.

5. CONCLUSION

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the two texts taken into consideration for this paper:

- The land of Kashmir has been divorced from the literature of partition. The emphasis on other regions sheds light on politics of representation of events that took place during

the time of Partition. Moreover, the divided land has always been presented as a token of beauty to evoke nationalist yearning. To maintain this trope of desire, the land has been divorced from the struggle of its own natives. Kashmir has been reduced to a territory of desire and its destruction has been ignored to maintain the façade.

- Women's accounts describe their transformation from individuals to social and communal targets of violence and brutality. However, these memoirs have been discarded and denied space within popular culture. The marginalization of weaker sections to maintain dominant ideas is highlighted by the lack of inclusion of narratives that challenge the dominant ideology.
- Every text should be read in terms of politics of the present. The narratives of Bakhshi and Mehta were revived after almost three decades indicating the renewed interest in understanding the politics of partition from the perspective of the marginalized sections. Moreover, these counter-narratives play a vital role in interrogating the popular tropes and challenge the ruling class by subverting their ideology.

6. NOTES

1. Pheran: A traditional outfit comprising of a long coat or cloak of wool worn by Kashmiri men and women. It is

usually accompanied by Poot, which makes it two sets of cloaks worn one above the other.

2. Taranga: The traditional head gear worn by Kashmiri women.
3. Rajatrangini: It is a chronicle of kings of Kashmir written by Kashmiri Brahman Kalhana in the 12th century CE.
4. Kota Rani: The queen who ruled in Medieval Kashmir till 1339. She married to save her motherland and is renowned for her sacrifice of the self to save the land of Kashmir.
5. Laleshwari (Lal Ded): Born in 1320, and died in 1392. She was a mystic of Kashmiri Shaivite sect. She is known for her Vakhhs that are sung even in the present time to express devotion.

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