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Transcending the Gendering of Partition: An Analysis of Manik Bandhopadhyay's Short Story 'The Final Solution'

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Abstract: The leitmotif of gender violence and gendering partition is a part and parcel of Partition history. Women as the bearers of national unity and integrity are the most wronged with during Partition. Historiography act as a chronotope, thereby obliterating subaltern (women) subjectivities. Women's agency is necessary for pushing masculinist protection/ desecration upon their body. Manik Bandhopadhyay's short story 'The Final Solution' is an index to seeing refugee women positioned as "ours" and "theirs" (Sengupta 24). Mallika's agency to choose prostitution as a means to feed her little son highlights her maternal instincts devoid of her constant humiliation by Pramatha. She rejects to act according to the permissible masculinist, heterosexual violence against her and stops Pramatha's advances towards her by strangling him to death. Mallika's action question the historian's role in remembering these women through their narratives but only as far as it seems important to them. Bhushan, Mallika's husband can be seen as the feminization of Mallika's male counterpart due to his inactive role in being unable to sustain his family. Mallika's revolutionary stance thus, symbolizes an anti-hegemonic bodyscape to reterritorialise her identity. This paper attempts to focus on the compulsive recovery that women are subjected that results to willful amnesia of the violation that they underwent. Women re-fashioning their role as breadwinners to sustain their family changes their gender existence in the family and social politics. The dominant gendering of partition will be thus the main focus of this paper.

Keywords: Chronotope, Subaltern, Agency, Hegemony, Bodyscape.



The narratives of Partition suggest the bitter unforgettable memories of the Partition violence. Out of the various forms of violence that shapes the history of Partition, gender violence holds a significant place. The interpretations of the narratives reveal the gender megalomania that is exercised upon women – who find themselves in a form of statelessness, homelessness and sans identity. A careful dissection of the gender roles finds the female population in crisis. Women live in a zone of silence where their history as asserted by Ritu Menon “is presumed to be something outside because they are outside the public and the political where history is made” (53). To be precise, they have no role in it. Urvashi Butalia mentions in her work that: “I am a woman/ I want to raise my voice/ because communalism affects me/ in every communal riot/ my sisters are raped, my children are killed/ my world is destroyed/ and then/ I am left to pick up the pieces” (60). The masculine tropes that are at play to victimize women during partition forcefully juxtapose Hindu-Muslim ideologies. Judith Butler in this context mentions that “we have to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear... to create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded/ dismissed” (151).

The sense of belonging, identity politics, detachment and the fluid status undergone by women are a major factor during partitions. Women when questioned their concepts on nationality and statehood remain in a dilemma as to their role in it. It's always an effrontery that women have to execute to realise their space in the junction of multifarious roles assigned to them. To quote Rubina Saigol's concept of “Mohajir” (2) women during partitions, which is a mode of peregrination undertaken by women from one space to another (whether migration/ partition) implies longing for a lost land/ identity. It is a term that connotes a group's sense of belonging as well as suffering in relation to their geopolitical boundary. Partition stories are categorized into three groups: a) Vengeance and Violence, b) Survival and Suffering, c) Harmony and Humanity. The story selected for this paper highlights the aftermath of the Partition which finds survivors in a major crisis period. The overnight transformation of people into destitutes, homeless added to their suffering and anxiety. Urvashi Butalia thereby asserts that, “I began to realize that Partition was surely more than just a political divide or a division of properties, of assets and liabilities. It was also, to use a phrase that survivors use repeatedly, a 'division of hearts.’” (11). The argument behind



this paper is to look into the zone of silence where women attempt to find a medium to articulate their experiences without invoking metaphors of purity and pollution.

The short story taken under purview is “The Final Solution” written by Manik Bandhopadhyay. The story revolves around a family that migrates to West Bengal after the Partition of Bengal, turning them destitute, homeless, devoid of an identity, anonymous in the crowd. The story mainly focuses on the motherly proclivation that is enacted by Mallika, the protagonist - fighting to hold on to her self-made hollow. The sexual approaches made towards her indicate how “... female bodies provided a space over which competitive games of men were played out” (Menon and Bhasin 21). Incidents of molestation, rape, gender violence surface in the partition history whereby women become the receptacle of masculine supremacy. The plausibility of those women creating their own agency are the prime targets to get depoliticized and de-historicized.

Mallika, the protagonist of the short story, attains the role of a breadwinner during such disturbing times is a marker to the failure of her male counterpart, Bhushan. In this narrative, Mallika accounts for the bearer/ custodian of her culture. Her physical violation is symbolic of an overt way of scraping the dignity of the mother nation. Partition literature is a living document of indemnification of women and the repressive policy meted out to women. The concept of nationalism often makes women culpable for some unsaid responsibility devoid of their choice. To realise the meaning of Bharatmata (motherland), it is seen that women are deemed as receptacles of honour where their self-dignity and individualism are sacrificed at the altar of the nation. Mallika in the story is shown in a different light as she steps out of the ingrained conception of women to be docile and submissive and men providing protection for the same. To support this statement, Cynthia Enloe’s concept of Nationalism can be quoted who said, “Nationalism(s) have typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (1011). Mallika’s husband Bhushan is rendered an inactive role in the whole plot who fails to stick to the image of men as the provider and the protector. Mallika carries out the role of both the home-maker and breadwinner thus erasing the powerful constructs of gender image during partitions.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “chronotope” (81) discusses a way of structuring history that



blots out actual stories and re-narrates to throw light upon them. Amidst a listicle of stories, the gender atrocities practiced against women during partitions become the passageway for chronotopical re-figuration. Mikhail Bakhtin puts forth two methodologies supporting his theory of chronotope – “istina” (109) meaning abstract knowledge and “Pravda” (109) meaning lived truth that is embodied and invested in emotionally. The protagonist of the story is seen to stand out against all the patriarchal manifestations smeared upon her. Rather, she chooses to take what belongs to her – the money that she collects from the thug Pramatha after strangling him to death. She defies to consent to his devilish ways and writes her own herstory which is her self-acknowledged Pravda. Thus, she erases any chances to evoke istina (109) regarding women as scapegoats during political bedlams.

The voice of the gendered subaltern has been manipulated, strangled over the time. The authoritative gaze that the oppressed undergoes makes them work within a pre-established boundary. Hence, they tend to remain only a passive population within the social structure. Gayatri Spivak’s essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1983) defines “subaltern” (271) as “one who do not have any voice.” According to her, the empty space in-between the oppressor and the oppressed where the existing population cannot be heard is the subaltern class. Naming states and countries or territorializing them does not suffice the purpose of limiting its population. To boundary the common mass of a nation/ state, its significant “other” (Beauvoir 19) i.e. its women must be stamped. Mallika, as a subaltern finds herself squished into a mattress along with three of her other family members. She finds herself in a claustrophobic situation pressurized to consent to the homogenic societal framework. Thus, the partition period shows “women’s bodies becoming privileged sites on whose surface the political programs of both states were brutally inscribed” (Bagchi 5).

The subaltern existence is meagerly found and that too in an autonomous form in the subaltern historiography. The accounts of the subalterns cannot be found in archives since it is made and preserved by the pressure-groups. Gayatri Spivak talks about the objectification of women as depicted in the nationalist history. Her essay reiterates the snatching away of the agency from women and portraying them as without any essence. The theorist claims to represent the demands



and concerns of this marginalized community. Nevertheless, with the attribution of epistemic violence, women are furthermore exploited. She entitles these women as “Subaltern” (271) - a term she culls from Antonio Gramsci’s theorization on the power pattern of the society. Spivak asserts that the essentialist agenda as followed by the theorists to represent the subaltern class should be measured. This standpoint indicates to the fact that the want of any subjective voice among the subalterns leave no doubt that their history has not been properly projected. The theorist puts forth two concepts to further elaborate the illustration of the subaltern by the intellectual theorists. Firstly, she mentions representation as “speaking for” (vetreten) and secondly, re-presentation as in “art and philosophy” (darsteten) (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 256). Pramatha’s inducement of Mallika to take up a job of prostitution is indicative of the simultaneous violation of women and her sacred space mainly, with her family as silent witnesses. People like Mallika can be termed as in-between migrants who were not given rehabilitation of financial assistance as the government believed them to be motivated by pittance given out to them to shift their home and hearth to West Bengal.

The subaltern status as stamped upon the women has no veracity. Simone de Beauvoir discusses that the male extols himself by mauling the female existence. The male reinvents ways and matters to feminize the characteristic features of the women. He portrays her as a substandard that does not have any faculty of her own. The man crowns himself to be the Self, the Subject whereas; the woman is loaded with all the nullifications of life (25). Mallika suffers both internally and externally due to the physical and mental hardship that she is made to go through. Basically, there are two images fastened to women’s role during partition – one that of as a victim and the other that of as one who survived it all (Bagchi 25). Mallika confronts both these extremities –i.e. victimized by society’s clawing attitude and as a survivor who learns to withstand the ravages of a patriarchal world. She is a victim of not only a direct violence but also of a discreet and venomous form of violence. Her entrance into prostitution is a complex negotiation of identities involving accommodation, assimilation, rejection, interrogation and resistance to the marked constructions of identity. Her giving up of her own self-dignity is possibly never going to revive her individual essence.

Women participating to root out forms of oppression against her create her own agency



(Didur 1). The question of agency become important to shape their identity and is beneficial to their interests. “The Final Solution” finds Mallika assimilating into the subordination exercised upon women. However, she is found to acquire her agency by reclaiming the authority upon her body. Many of the women during partition decided to remain within the zone of silence in order to shield themselves from being questioned about their survival story. Mallika chooses silence as a form of survival strategy only until the gender politics at play does not hold her in its grip. She breaks the stereotypical figuration of women and violates the strictures of the female role, challenges male supremacy, fights for her sexual freedom and to emancipate herself from the shackles of body politics. The oppressed groups such as women were stamped with traditional roles which were mandated by a patrilineal diktat within their families, restricting their expressions of freedom (Moore 27). Manik Bandhopadhyay’s purpose thus, lies to derive that the non-bhadralok’s gender, class, caste experiences need to be archived to welcome multi-dimensional view of Partition. Most of the times, women during Partition try to non-conform to the paternal authority, however, the polymorphous presence of the gender construct disallows them to emerge independent of their subservient status thereby, turning them to be vain bhadramahila or unfortunate targets of men like Pramatha’s disloyalty.

The human body is a representation of spatial and social relations which make it a kernel of politics at play. Mallika’s subverting the hegemonic bio-power is threatening to the sex role determined by society based on the visibility of sex/ gender (Sengupta 43). Her role-reversal evokes the concept that “the only good woman is a dead woman one who when she is bad she lives, or when she lives she is bad” (Bagchi 26). Thus, Mallika represents idealization of female body when she is rooted in her spatial boundary but also as one who becomes a consumable commodity when deterritorialized from her personal space. The gendering of partition hence, is a project under imperialism where women become an ingredient limited to strict rules and mannerisms. The stance taken by Mallika is an overlapping of the gender politics and situating oneself as a living, breathing entity amidst normative categorization of the second sex as termed by Simone de Beauvoir. Mallika’s primary memory of undergoing gender violation makes her implement the “willful amnesia” and use her body as a site of resistance. Her allusive acceptance of using the body as a



medium of survival does not make her impure is the final solution that the author intends to accomplish. Rather it's a "compulsive recovery" of her subservient status and negating the body politics that liberates her from the leave in, leave out dilemma of appropriation to the hegemonic social dictum. Lastly, it can be said that Mallika does not fall under the category of "unattached woman" (Vurity 8) who had been economically dependent on their men and due to the death of their providers had nowhere to go. Nevertheless, Mallika stands out from this categorization and makes an identity of her own self on her own demand thus disrupting the common concept of gendering partition.

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