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Floating Identities and Complex Humanitarian Emergencies: An Analysis of Select Narratives of the Holocaust and the Partition

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Abstract: A Humanitarian Emergency is a state of conflicts and challenges that threaten the plurality, inclusive nature of a state or society. The clashes are based on manufactured myths and discrimination of certain identifiable groups. Since identity is polyvalent, it is not characterised by fixation and stability. Language, culture, community, and gender are the pivotal points in its construction. An individual, being the member of linguistic, cultural and ethnic groups and communities, adopts the similar number of identities at the same time. These identities are at stake, when they fall into the trap of some humanitarian crisis. For example, the skullcaps and beards symbolise a religious Muslim man's identity, but they have also been exploited to establish the myths of Islamophobia and terrorism. A Muslim with beard and cap is under interrogation and trials to prove that he is not a terrorist. Thus a man's identity shifts from a Muslim to a terrorist in a state of emergency. The paper is an attempt to explore how the life of an individual is under threat because of his/her various identities that are always in floating state in humanitarian emergencies. The Partition of India in 1947 and the Holocaust of Germany bear a common pattern of shifts in identities. AnamZakiria's record of interviews with the Partition survivors and Josey G. Fisher's and Anita Brostoff's accounts of oral narratives about the Jews' execution exhibit how an individual is traumatised because of constant moves of identity. Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers*, Amrita Pritam's*Pinjar,* BapsiSidhwa's*Ice-Candy Man,* Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* also partially address the issues of identity modifications of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs

during the Partition.

Key Words: Complex humanitarian emergency, partition, holocaust, identity.

Complex Humanitarian Emergency, a term often used in studies of Social Sciences, corresponds to the state of anarchy in a country, region or society where there is a complete crisis or collapse of system due to some local, national or international conflicts or war. Such emergencies are to be understood in terms of ethnic, cultural, communal and sectarian clashes. Bloodshed, murder, rape, abduction are political against a community, race, groups are political strategies through which certain goals are achieved. A vast body of population is forced to migrate and seek shelter in another region or country. Sometimes these human-made gross attempts are made to restructure the society or the state. The diverse nature of different practices are challenged under the garb of uniformity, national interest and common welfare which determine the essence of such catastrophes. These emergencies mark a societal, cultural, familial and psychological shifts in identities. A humanitarian emergency may be a state sponsored violence and sometimes the mass hysteria.

Twentieth century was a period of various ups and downs in the political history of the world. Colonialism was on its way to dusk. Democracy and nationalism were to be introduced in the newly created or liberated counties. Democracy paved the way of possibilities for each section of society to weave new formulae of political representations. Nationalism presented the stunts of ideologies and identities. Each divisive force – language, religion, race, colour, class and origin helped developing various discourses of ideologies and identities. Consequently the politics of inclusion, exclusion and polarisation of certain ethnic, religious, racial and linguistic communities governed the scene and brought these divisions on the surface in majoritarian power gaining process. Conflicts between the communities rose by leaps and bounds. Minorities became the scapegoats of politics based on such binaries.

Communal rivalries between Muslims and Hindus have always been realised in social history of India, but the seeds of religious nationalities were planted during the freedom struggle of India. At the dawn of August 15, 1947, India was returned its Independence with newly erected Indo-Pak borders. The creation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan out of the Partition of the

Punjab and West Bengal is reported to have been the most catastrophic incident in the history of South Asia. However, the Partition is more than a historical event because borders function more blatantly at present, and of course, the politics of both the nations is greatly influenced by the other side of the lines. The scholars and intellectuals of media and academia are much concerned to decode the communal narratives among the populace to avoid the religious strife in the society.

The idea of partition has been differently addressed in politics, history, media and academia. It generally corresponds the meaning of division of the land and resources.*Amrita Bazar Patrika* considered the tragedy as "the departing kick of British imperialism at both the Hindus and Muslims" while the Dawn headlined it as "territorial murder." (Butalia 8).Whatever might have been the labels but the consequences were too drastic to be expressed. Historians claim that the Partition of India has been the bloodiest event in the history of South Asia. More than fifteen million people were forced to cross the border and leave the land of their birth. Around two million people met their tragic ends. Around seventy five thousand women were raped and abducted. Thirty five thousand women were recovered from both the nations. Home and property were put on the mercy of the majority of both the nations.

The eastern front of Pakistan, now Bangladesh again in 1971 faced bloodshed, murder, and rape at a very large scale. Hundreds of students, activists, professors, intellectuals, professionals, businessmen and many other potential leaders were targeted to be killed. Around 500,000 people are estimated to have been killed. Dhaka University was the first of targets to control the leadership. Homes and towns were looted and set on fire. Susan Brownmiller's report says "…200,000 to 400,000 women were raped. Eighty percent of the raped women were Muslims, reflecting the population of Bangladesh, but Hindu and Christian were not exempt… Hit and run rape of large numbers of Bengali women were brutally simple in terms of logistics as the Pakistani regulars swept through and occupied the tiny, populous land…(81). Though the data is challenged by the later studies suggesting the number to several hundreds.

There have been recorded similar kinds of consequences during the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. Jews were expelled from the country, murdered and their women raped. Their businesses were occupied and their properties destroyed.It is reported that around 34000 Jews met their tragic

deaths at the hands of killing forces at Babi Yar on 28 and 29 September 1941. More than thirteen thousand Jews from the Minsk ghetto were killed in nearby Tuchinki on November 7. This is a rough estimate of the total deaths. Pat Morgan writes "when the awful events of Kristallnacht were over, 91 people had died, 7,500 businesses had been devastated and 267 synagogues had been burned to the ground. There had been many instances of rape and suicide. In addition, up to 30,000 Jewish men had been rounded up by the SA and the Gestapo secret police, arrested and transported to concentration camps like Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen" (6).

The recurring patterns of violence against men, women, children and the olds are notable to understand the nature of the brutality inside the murderers. Such identity centred violence against the people occupy a considerable space in the social history of almost every nation. Anything more brutal and inhuman cannot be expected from the world than what took place in the twentieth century i.e. the two world wars, the Holocaust and the Partition of India, and the Partition of Bengal asthey were the 'division of hearts' rather than political rifts. Over the nights friends had become foes, neighbours had become strangers, and police and military guards had become murderers. They are all the humanitarian emergencies that sought to restructure the societies, redefine the state and the populace. Various preoccupations, misconceptions, stereotypes and myths supply a strong support for the violence in the time of humanitarian crisis. And all these events worked to divide the nation and reconstruct the communities and societies. This was a shift in identities of an individual who could be fit into various frames of imposed identities. The political history of a nation is synonymous to the history of war and violence. There are noticed some remarkable changes in political structures, geographical boundaries and socio-cultural relations when the centres of power shift. Dalrymple highlights the patterns of violence used during the two humanitarian emergencies "Partition is central to modern identity in the Indian subcontinent, as the Holocaust is to identity among Jews, branded painfully onto the regional consciousness by memories of almost unimaginable violence"

Identity has emerged as one of the major and popular discourses among the scholars. Academicians address the nature of diverse functions and the political exploitations of identity. The identity has become an essential part of the politics of twentieth century and the present. Various

socio-cultural and political discourses brought the issue of identity to the general consciousness. The orientation of identities like religion, language and sexuality are all at certain conflict zones divided between the centre and the margin. The religion oriented identity, at present, has notably become the part of the victims as well as the perpetrators. The execution of the Jews during the Holocaust, Hindu-Muslim-Sikh war of the Partition, the massacre of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, the constant marginalisation and ghettoization of the minorities in South Asia at present, are significantly religion centred.

The concept of floating identities has been borrowed from Claude Levi Strauss's concept "floating signifier" meaning to denote a signification. This is open to accept any meaning. They are the signifiers which do not refer to any single signified. There is not stability in the meaning they suggest. Daniel Chandler explains theterm as "a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even any signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean" (78). As a floating signifier is open for various interpretations so is an individual. He/she is the member of various familial, social, racial groups and communities. There are certain misconceptions and myths about these groups and communities that are thrusted upon the member of the group one belongs to. These affiliative identities give their members a constellation of identities. These emergencies are to be understood in terms of ethnic, racial, communal and sectarian clashes because violence is erupted and justified in the light of the identities related to these sections. Many communal myths against Hindus and Muslims during the Partition and the racial misconceptions against the Jews during the Holocaust functioned to validate these mythical identities. Moreover, disguise imposed another identity on the people during the Partition and the Holocaust. The disguised beings, though quite resistant to the adaptations, had to be the part of the edited identity. Josey G. Fisher observes "faced with "wrong" in the extreme, what was "right" became fluid and confusing. It was an exhilarating challenge to outwit the enemy or a quiet source of pride that they had not taken things "lying down" (XIII).

Thousands of interviews, diaries and memoirs along with fiction and poetry have been written to record the sufferings of the victims of the Holocaust as well as those of the Partition of India.

During the Partition of India, the two major communities of India – Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were not treated merely the members of their communities but also the vehicles to deliver what has politically and culturally been thrusted upon them. They were presented as the abductors and rapists of 'our women', and therefore, 'their women'should undergo the same kind of treatment.Urvashi Butalia mentions the scene of India after the demolition of Babri Masjid. She presents an Indian version of one sided arguments which mobilized Hindus that Muslims had killed Hindus at Partition, they had raped Hindu women, and so they must in turn be killed, and their women subjected to rape" (7).

Being Hindu or Muslim during the Partition of India meant more than being the members of their communities. Some bad concepts formed their negative identities in terms of abductors and rapists of each other's women. The identity of a Muslim was obtruded as traitors, violent and orthodox while the Hindus were framed as unfaithful and untrustworthy who driven the Muslims out of their birth place.

The violence that occurred during the Partition is also rooted in recurring myths against both the communities. Anam Zakaria mentions the censored truth that "I was often told by my schoolteachers and even my own grandmother that Hindus were treacherous and mischievous people; that they would discriminate against Muslims and abuse Islam" (6). The *Organiser*, an RSS run magazine, in an issue entitled 'During the War of 1947' also made one sided argument that Muslim men abducted the Hindu and Sikh women because abduction has been a "notorious and age old practice of Muslims" (Butalia 184)and that Muslims are the victims of the lust while there arises no question about the Hindu and Sikh men of being victims of their instincts. They just provided the shelter to the Muslim women.It also writes that Hindu and Sikh men did not abduct the Muslim women rather they provided shelter to them, but the reality is what Butalia observes that "there had been no 'good' people and no 'bad' ones; virtually every family had a history of being both victims and aggressors" (11).

There are various myths and misconceptions about the Jews too such as "Jews have too much power", "Jews are only concerned about money", "you cannot trust a Jew", "Jews have big noses" "Jews are filthy", "Jews are peace-wreckers" etc. The myth of German's racial superiority

created a binary between the Germans and the Jews. Jews were segregated with the labels that they are an inferior race and a threat to the German race. The racial discrimination gave the Jews an identity of sub-human beings. The Nazis launched of scheme The Final Solution for the systematic persecution of the Jews. Consequently about six million Jews are reported to have been killed in the racial discrimination.

Morgan quotes Martin Luther preaching "Know, Christian, that next to the devil you have no enemy more cruel, more venomous and violent than a true Jew" (Morgan 2). Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* portrays the character of Shylock as a cruel money lender who is devoid of mercy and can go to any extent to recover his loan. Same reflection is observed from Christopher Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. The protagonist has a thirst for wealth. He seems a semi-demon. Many of such texts supply a strong support to continue the myths about some particular community to portray its members in particular colours that help establish monitored identities. Both the dramatists' caricatures of the Jews in their plays reflect the views Elizabethan society was holding about the Jews. The literary representation of the Jews as greedy is an interpretation of their social and economic positions that Christians have been worried about in England. In fact, these narratives are the legacy that continue haunt a particular group or community and attach them with stereotypes in order to validate the oppression during any emergency.

These myths are created to represent a hidden political agenda that helps defining the character of a particular community. This character formation serves to offer a mythic identity to member of the target community. The agenda of myths also helps to make a community the other. The personal identity of the member is attacked and the affiliative identity is emphasised. One can be identified with various misconceptions related to one's race, community, gender and region. This is the state when the social identity collapses and there emerge other identities in the light of which violence and terror is defended. These myths are created to malign the character of a community and the identity of the whole community is coded into the myths that vindicate the violence inflicted upon the community. At present, the myth of Islamophobia has been created to establish the identity of all the Muslims as jihadists and terrorists and in the light of this myth, the exclusion and the execution of Muslims are justified.

Hiding the Identity: In a state of emergency, the change of identity has been noticed because the communal or racial identity of an individual is under the frames of different labels. The creation of the new identity and hiding of the one's former identity is an attempt for the survival during the crisis. During the Holocaust, Jews had to make a denial to their communal and racial identity in order to invalidate the imposed allegations. Many Jews started speaking Polish, some purchased the identity cards from the Christians, and others adopted the life style of German Catholics. Anita Brostoff discusses how a Jews family in Germany was compelled to hide its own identity to avoid the possible violence. The members of the family narrate their experience:

> Polish passports had been secured.
>
> Now the escape. Through the sewers was abhorrent to me. Only the gates remained.
>
> At the moment of the changing of the guard a group of us ran to the gates. An alarm was sounded; powerful lights made us highly visible and easy targets.
>
> A few of us did make it. We ran blindly. Only Hashem could guide us to the forest. (Glatstein107).

There is recorded another traumatic experience of a Jewish girl who undergoes many changes.She escapes from the sights of the turmoil and migrates to Poland. She has to seek shelter in Christianity and does what she never did and liked:

> Christmas is approaching. The air is festive. I must not be an outsider. I am Lucinka, a Polish girl, and I must do whatever any other young Polish girl would do (Glatstein109).

Josey G. Fisher mentions how an individual under disguise travels between two identities and lives under a constant trauma. The disguised people are actually the coded beings, who with the help of a few symbolic appearances, try to assimilate among the people, but are always under threat to be decoded. The Nazis interpreted them as the Christians while they denied the Christianity and presented resistance inwardly, thus clash between the inward resistance and the outer sophistication:

> A Polish Jew lived out the war with Christian papers, her physical appearance blending with the non-Jewish community. Another teenager walked the streets of pre-war Berlin freely, appearing as a typical German schoolgirl. Yet the threat of physical attack from

the classmates who knew her Jewish identity haunted her. To protect herself she became anonymous, copying the dress of the very girls she feared and masking her facial   reactions. Others recount dreams that they had years later of their fear of physical   attack. (XII).

Culture, community, language and region are all stamped on an individual's personality. The disguise is never so easy for an individual. The assimilation in another's ways of life is the assassination of one's own ways of life. Extra efforts to be conscious to the disguised life undermine the functionary of the self. Many Muslims in post –partition Punjab were reported to have been continuously living the life of the Sikh. Omar Khalidi encounters a man in a mosque in the east Punjab. He was looking every inch a Sikh in in turban, beard and kada (hand ring):

Janab I am a Muslim, my real name is Allah Ditta, son of PiranDitta, Arun Singh is my fake name. I belong to a village in Amritsar district.When the   partition disturbances took place, we were too poor to travel to Pakistan. Our   family of potters was so well integrated in the village that we did not think of   migrating hoping that the dark nights of killingswould end.

Shauna Singh Baldwin, in *What the Body Remembers,* delineates the theme of the symbolic politics of identity during the time of the Partition.The perceptions about the wrongs done by the members of a community, were identified with the symbols of the religion. The crimes were treated synonymous to the symbolic identities, therefore subjected to be appropriated by either conversion or murder. The space of choice is, in fact, the space for the identities to float from the mythic one to the appropriated.Friend, foe and neighbour were all instilled into one individual, therefore the doubt helped collapse the one identity and faith erected the other. Baldwin presents a scene depicting how the religious symbols were targeted at the time of the Partition"there Muslims singed the beards of easily identifiable Sikh men, tore off the turbans of young and old alike…those who were known to be Hindus or Sikhs who displayed the slightest aversion were made to eat beef. Hindu temples were desecrated with cow's blood." (474).

Circumcision as a Mark of Community: Circumcision is a common religious practice of the Jews and the Muslims. In the time of an emergency, circumcision becomes an instrument to identify a Jew and a non-Jew or a Muslim and a non-Muslim. During the Holocaust, the male members of the Jew community could easily be distinguished and put to death. Janek, a Jew fleas to

a Polish village and finds a job in the fields, but "something about Janek made him different from other migrants" (Brostoff 109) and one day when he was ploughing in the fields, a gang approached him:

"Pull your pants down, pull your pants down."

"I can't, I can't."

"You must." They pulled his pants down.

"We were right, we were right, you are a filthy Jew" They dragged his nude body into the forest. There they hacked him to pieces and threw his remains into a pit so nobody would know what they had done." (Brostoff110).

During the Partition of India, the trouser-test was a very common sight and was used as a device to mark the communal identity. In *Train to Pakistan*, having found Mansa Ram not circumcised, a gang of Muslim boys cut his penis and his wife is raped on road. The communal identity crisis compelled some Hindus of the newly formed Pakistan to convert or circumcise in order to guise themselves as not different. BapsiSidhwa in *Ice-Candy Man* mentions the dangers of communal imprints through the character of the gardener Hari who is circumcised and converted to Islam. Similarly Muslim men in the Punjab adopted the attires of the Sikh and Pundits in order to be looked likePundits and Sikh. Niradh C. Chaudhary in his autobiography writes about a group of Bengali Hindu boys who stripped a fourteen year old Muslim boy naked to check if he was a Hindu or a Muslim. He was circumcised, and therefore he was hanged till death in a pond with bamboo poles.

Tattoo as an Imposed Identity: Amrita Pritam, in *Pinjar*, shows how the identity of a woman is undermined and an abductor's identity is imposed on her body. Pooro is abducted by Rashida as a revenge on her aunt who once was kept by Pooro's uncle for three nights. Rashida forcibly converts her to Islam, marries her and engraves 'Hamida' on her arm. Pooro is imposed a new identity with the new name and her own identity is destabilised. During the day she is Hamida and at nights, she is Pooro. She floats between the two worlds – one of Hamida and second is that of Pooro:

One day he brought a stranger with him and asked his wife stretch out her arm. The

man tattooed on it the new name she had been given when she was married to Rashia. From that day "Hamida was not only inscribed on her skin in dark green letters but everyone began to call her by that name (25).

In fact, tattooing the women had become one of the most haunting practices of carving men's identity over women's bodies during the Partition of India. Men, having kidnapped the women of the rival community, tattooed or marked their breasts, genitals and foreheads with their (abductor's) names, their family titles or slogans to convey the sense of victory over rival community or the nation across the border. Radha Kumar reviewing the book *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, writes "it is difficult to speak of a more potent statement of genocidal intent than tattooing "Pakistan Zindabad" on the body of a Hindu women, or Hindustan Zindabad" on the body of a Muslim women". On the other side, the constructions of new identities over women's bodies, not only signify their loss of the self but also give the patriarchal labels like *rakhails, (mistresses)* and the used stuffs that kept women between many lifelong transitional identities.

Any identity, how much powerful, is in a state of threat and challenge in humanitarian emergencies because various misconceptions, stereotypes and myths propagate to render it into the threat to the state, nation and humanity. All the communities have to be extra conscious about the cultural and political framings. They may be censored discourses devoted to the communal, cultural, linguistic and racial hypocrisy. They create an image of doubts and interrogation. The current communal upheaval in the South Asian region is the result of propagandas and myths.

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