



PARTITION THROUGH FEMALE LENS: A STUDY OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *INDEPENDENCE*

PRITAM BASAK

Research Scholar, Department of English and Modern European Languages, Lucknow University

Email: pritambasak65@gmail.com



Article info

Article Received:30/05/2023

Article Accepted:27/06/2023

Published online:30/06/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.2.305](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.2.305)

Abstract

The present paper illuminates the discussion of atrocities done upon women and their bold stance during the course of Partition in 1947. Beyond denoting the regional division, this partition connotes the break of unbreakable chain of socio-political-psychological relation. That succeeds shaking the female place. Like men, they are equally the victim of the tragic situation. They also face insecurities, identity crisis, existential otherness, ablation, and threats. At the baseless situation, when men are mostly involved in outside riots, they take over the internal maintenance. To survive to be the pillar is kind of their call. Thus, like other holocausts, the impact of partition never distinguishes the male-female binary. Irrespective of gender difference, they both get traumatized somehow or the other way. This kind of politics of gender discourses situated in any human history becomes metahistorical when they are represented in the form of literary works of art. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's marvelous novel *Independence* (2022) unfolds the vivid picture of Partition and its aftermath through the female lens, especially three sisters-charming Deepa, virtuous Jamini, and skillful Priya. It tracks the trajectory of their indulged experiences which are verifiable. They get the multiple meanings that keep them alive and face the harsh reality with an indomitable spirit. They try to maintain their metaphysical bond ever after they depart from each other. The positivity and aspiration that sustain with them give them a power of recovery not to fight against the trauma of partition but to stand firmly before the patriarchal power structure that causes the psychological division, an unrooted partition. Thus, they root the formation of 'self-identity'.

Keywords: Partition, Gender Discourse, Trauma, Recovery, Self-identity.

Introduction

There is no doubt that any calamities like Partition are humanity's nightmare, which is preoccupied with strikes, bloodshed, molestation and break of harmony. This results in the loss of home, relatives, identity, family and lovers known as "Social Suffering"(Morse 48), which "Occurs as the result of war, famine, or violence and occurs at the societal (national/population) level or within

ethnic/cultural groups" (Morse 49). Inter-community tension is what Dominick Lacapra hails as the "Founding Trauma" that is the trauma that paradoxically becomes the basis for for collective or personal identity" (724). They are the manifestation of human frailty through their own stigmatic structure, which is dogmatized by the multiple layers of binary. The following situation of trauma imposes upon everyone. The senses of panic overpower the

situation and change it drastically. They know no boundary of the binary. As a result, all irrespective of any class, caste, gender are persecuted and try to find their own way out. During the astrocytes we are mere receptive than reactive that doubles the pains. Especially, women are the victim of 'mute suffering'. They are restricted domestically. Thus the outside calamity couple with the inside oppression lead them to become traumatic. To recover from such constrains, they aspire to be independent. Menon and Bhasin have observed that in Partition fiction "women's voices, speaking for themselves" can be found (12).

The Female visualization of the partition is abundant in either female author writing about partition or the female character presenting this phantasmagoria of Partition. Literature is embedded with this portral of Partition in different works of art such as Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* or *Cracking India*, Anita Desai's *Clear Light of a Day*, Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*, Khadija Mastur's *A Promised Land*, Urvashi Brudalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, Kabita Puri's *Partition Voices: Untold British Stories*, Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Women*, Gitanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*. Therefore the perspective or placement of female in Partition Literature is not a new phenomenon. Through the writing or representation, they take an active part in such turmoiled situation. These writers "...do not limit their female protagonist to the conventional view of self-sacrificing womanhood. Though women were incessantly traumatized by their Partition experience, they didn't yield to it. They were crushed but they lived to tell the tale, drawing from their inner resources" (Arora 188). Chita Banerjee Divakaruni takes up the same kind of exposition in her writing, which mostly centres on female experience. Her writing ranges from mythology. She does not hesitate to break age-old belief that women are the destroyer than preserver. There are enumerable instances that substantiate this belief- such as Sita's abduction is the cause of Ramayan, Draupadi for Mahabharat, Helen for Trojan War. Such historical belief is mythical. She dispels by dissociating from Beauvoir's statement, that is, mythical woman is the absolute other, without reciprocity. She brings the enlightenment in the lives

of women. She revisits the history and provides us an alternative picture that is also justifiable and seems realistic. She is now the strong voice of women's rights and visions. Her novels such as *Palace of Illusion*, *Mistress of Heart*, *Forest of Enchantment*, *The Last Queen* alter the whole history of women seen from male point of view. She calls for what John Kelley preferred women "to restore to history" (131).

Independence (2022) is one of such partition texts that set against the Partition of 1947, ordeal through three sisters - Beautiful Deepa, Virtuous plus secretive Jamini, Skillful Priya. After their names, the chapters get the name. Charlatanically, Deepa, the elderly one, possesses immense beauty and is also a singer. Jamini, the middle one, has the best vocal cord among the sisters but is abnormal in her left leg (which is smaller than the right one). Priya, the most intelligent one (only matriculated one), is an ambitious girl whose ambition is to become a doctor like her father, Nabakumar, and serves poor people with all medical facilities. Their services are splited accordingly- Priya is an assistant to her father's medical help and Jamini and Deepa an assistants to mother Bina's food-making and quilt-weaving (another source of income). Their middle-class struggle reminds of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) where she exposed the fundamental grievance of middle-class women and their entrapment within domestic life.

Placing these female characters against the backdrop of the violence of Partition is one of key factors that credit this book a high mark. The photograph in the newspaper captures the violent evidence - slaughtered dead bodies, separated arms, burning houses, marches, lockdown, abolition, molestation, strikes, and so on. Major incidents are documented such as Noakhali Massacre and Direct Action Day. By massacre, they install terror in minds and signal their omnipotence. Still, one's mistake would not be repaid by another as Amit says- "The Muslims in Noakhali have done atrocious things, but the ones in Ranipur have not". Also adds - "Didn't you just hear the prime minister calling for togetherness? Didn't he entreat us not to be communal in our thinking?" (174).The superior

agitated group unsettles the lives of the common. Nabo jumps into duty risking his life – "I know the back roads between here and the clinic. I will make sure to stay away from any rioters" (45). Problem piles upon another problem. Cholera and Typhoid circulate all around rapidly. The poor are being deprived of all advantages and become helpless and foodless. It does not leave Nabakumar's Family. It causes Nabo's death (on his way to his Clinic located in Calcutta), Bina's traumatic sleepwalking, Jamini being burned and assaulted, and the whole family split. Priya stands firmly-

Take care of them you said to me, Baba. I made a promise. I must keep standing on my own feet like the woman you admired, Marangini Hazra Sarojini Naidu. Carry the flag of my independence. It is what you would have wanted for me. It is what I want for myself. (67)

Putting them into a place of challenge against the patriarchal set-up marks another identical mark of feminist discourse. Gender is not biological but social entity (Millet). The male mindset always is dominating. They internalize the thought of their superiority over female. Beauvoir (1952) quotes that "Man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" and "Woman is not born, but becomes". So they dominate like the colonizer did on the colonized. This male-female dichotomy is similar to the relation between proletariat and bourgeoisie. They serve like a system of Brahmin who considers the lower caste an untouchable. Thus they take female as 'untouchable', whose higher qualification can even disgrace to humanity. They live like a commodity, first of father and then that of husband. They are sometimes taken as a product to be consumed. This structure of patriarchal exploitation is similar to capitalism what Barrett (1985) comments that women's oppression is entrenched in the structure of capitalism. The set-up here constructs to restrict the female in different ways such as – the issue of bribery for the marriage, girl's disability to attend the pyre, and the issue of high education. Wishing high ambition is supposed to be a transgression. They become the beholder of education system, which is corrupt by their own rule- high marking for

men than women. Irrespective of such prevailed injustice in education, Priya shows her inner spirit strongly – "I do not care. I would not allow such trivialities to bother me. I would prove to them that I can be as good a doctor as any man" (17). To be away from such constructed self, reaction continues. Priya castigates the marriage which is set to be another form of gender oppression. Engles (1884) thus claims that a women's subordination is not an outcome of biological proposition but of social interaction, and that the institution of family is made such a complicate system in which men easy dominates women. Priya rejects the custom of pyre saying- "Baba never believed in such senseless customs. We sisters will do it" (55). Their aspiration is forwarded by the endless support of their father, Nabakumar and one uncle, Somnath, father's friend. The pity for their condition is what parcels in Stuart Hall's *The Subjection of Women*. Thereby they boost up and guard against the male-tradition. They are driving for new room that symbolizes the withdrawal from male society- "the secret room, the attic hideaway, the suffragette cell came to stand for a separate world, a flight from and from adult sexuality" (Showalter). Thus the way they are chained and the way they unchain themselves leave the feminist discourse into a spotlight.

Personal choice and Love account as a reaction against socio-cultural-political pressures. That means they prefer to act what they like rather than what the duties they are allotted by the societal protocol. In the story, sisters feed their own choices. Deepa chooses to fly in Dacca with her love interest Raza, a Muslim guy and son of Doctor Abdullah, leaving the family behind. Jamini chooses to have a three days sexual relation with Amit to feed her sexual desire during Priya's absence. Priya lures her heart not with love but with the crazy ambition. To dismiss the long run implicit relation, priya boldly speaks- "I cannot keep these, considering how things change between us" (143). The choice of love is celebrated beyond boundaries. This cross-cultural overseas love retain temporarily between Arther and Priya and Mamoon and Deepa. They are completely one-sided. On the one hand, Priya does not reply to love letter received from Arthur. Her silence stops the journey further. The craziness of

Mamoon's love subsides the matter of mourning for husband's (Raza) death. But Deepa feels embarrassed and stops immediately. Thus, they become not 'the bearer of meaning but carrier of meaning'.

Migration is developed as a reaction against internal complexities of native place. Whereas they are rocked in their own place, migration gives way to a new open ended life. It can let them imaginative of a career where they can liberate their own self. The place where there is a chance to get advantages of learning new knowledge, new gate of thought, new option of career. Accommodation is also required. Thus in the story, Deepa migrates to Dacca with Raza and starts accommodating with her name 'Aliya Begum', food like beef, and profession like singing patriotic songs of Tagore and Nazrul on Dacca Radio. The inclusion of songs for expressing the hidden core is what Divakaruni mentions in "Kolkata Literary Meet" – " Though the book is written in English, It has a Bengali soul I think" (00:14:23 - 00:14:28).When everything goes smoothly, the unknown death of Raza turns everything upside down. She experiences the existential crisis and indulges into nostalgia:

O Mother, I hold your feet close to my heart.

May I die here, in the land where I was born.
(253)

An Indian historian literary person Sisir Kumar Das compliments that the most pervading emotion in writing on the Partition is nostalgia, the memories of home and the acute of losing it forever. Just staring at her Child Sameera, she spirits herself up and hopes alive. Priya, on other hand, leaves her family and lover Amit to migrate to America to accomplish her Doctoral career and intends to become the pillar of the family. She shares her desperation for abroad to Somnath:

I have never been fascinated by foreigners, you know that. And I do not care about living abroad. But I have already been rejected by the Calcutta Medical College. I cannot wait for two years in the hope that their admission policies will grow equitable. Becoming a

doctor is too important for me to take a chance like that. (129)

Despite her regret, she crosses the sea and settles there in a hut-like accommodation against the irresistible fight of the hot weather of summer and the cooling breeze of winter. Still, she sustains teeth-bitten. She becomes restless deciphering letters, recently received, containing information like the Fire Night in Ranipur, and the miserable condition of Jamini and Bina. Speculating over the epistolary content, she reports to the committee for a leave. She gains on a overlapping the condition she engages in rescuing Deepa from the imprisonment of Mamoon, who forces her to marry him that stops her to come back to India. Finally, throwing the lives of Amit, Jamini, Priya, Shariff, and Arshad at risk, Deepa is saved safely with a trivial cause of death of Amit caused by the shot of Bullet. Overcoming all loses, their adventurous recovery marks the picaresque spirit of these sisters.

Identity formation is the ultimate goal that any movement like feminism seeks for. Helen Cixous (2010) solicits that woman must write about herself. In this story, there are ample evidences in support of this quest. First of all, the chapters are repetitively named after these three sisters. This shows the emphasis of their personality. Secondly, there are so many places mention the names of legendary figures like Marangoni Hazra and Sarojini Naidu and their fellow contribution for the country plus women liberation. The fighting spirit of Matangini Hazra is recalled by Nabakumar as "...she fought until the day she died, shot by the police. She was in her seventies by then. She died carrying the flag, chanting Bande Mataram" (28). Nabakumar inspires Priya by considering them "your heritage" (28). Thirdly, they are also held their head high by the Sarojini's speech on female education and liberation of self. Her speech advocated that it is the education that can build the good human being. And it is not you alone but we all become indispensably necessary to build a real nation (148). Thereafter, they are identified as "Daughter of Independence": You are a daughter of Independence, the country's future. Women like you are the ones for which we fought and died, the ones who will transform India. You must carry the flag

forward. You may fall from time to time. We all did. What is important is to get up again (278).

Conclusion:

In a nutshell, this novel justifies the predicament of female self in the context of Partition. It explicit the trajectories of their undergoing challenges, trauma, and sufferings amidst the cruelty of humanity at the time dehumanization of Partition:

Partition was surely more than a political divide, or a division of properties, of assets, and liabilities. It was also, to a phrase that survivors use repeatedly, a 'division of hearts'. It brought unfold suffering, tragedy, trauma, pain, and violence to communities who had higher to lived together in some kind of social contract. (Brutalia 8)

Nothing holds their life except the indomitable spirit. They tackle daringly all the dystopian phenomes such as alienation, nostalgia and existential crisis. Even to stay away from 'cultural-mediated self' (Kate Millet), their role here seems to be 'performativity' (Samuel Butler) as they interrogate the female unnegotiated condition but begin the masculine jobs like the business in market by selling the woven quilt and outside Doctoral service to the poor . After the consequent deaths of Nabakumar, Raza, Amit, these sisters stand by their family and take over the responsibility whole-handedly. Therefore, the stereotypical image of women as vulnerable, seductress, burden of society gets questioned and endorses self-identity, which result is in their strong socio-political-psychological establishment. On the side, the brutality of Partition rolls out, and on the other side, the 'feminine self' pushes derogatorily. The reiteration from such prolonged silence in the violent situation is narrativized in the form of liberation. Their multidimensional liberty, what the title and the story actually imply, speaks of Brutalia's call 'to break the silence of women who have suffered'.

Work Cited:

Barrett, Michele. "Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender". *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class, and Race in*

Literature and Culture. Ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt. New York: Methuen, 1985, 65-85. Print

_____. *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter*. UK: Verso Books, 2014. Print

Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage publication, 1949. Print

Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. US: Penguin Publication, 2017. Print

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. UK: Routledge, 2011. Print

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa". Translated by Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, 1976. Print

Das, Sisir Kumar. *A History of Indian Literature: 1911-1956, Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy*. India: Sahitya Akademi, 2005. Print

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Independence*. India: Harper Collins, 2022. Print

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton press, 1963. Print

Kolkata LiteraryMeet. "Independence (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni) - Tata Steel Kolkata Literary Meet 2023". *Youtube*, 30 Jan, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/live/XXbzjRuYYM?feature=share>. Accessed on 15 May, 2023.

Kelley, Joan. *Women, History and Theory*. Chicago: UP of Chicago, 1984. Print

LaCapra, Dominick. "Trauma, Absence, Loss". *Critical inquiry*, (1999): pp 696-727.

Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. New York: Columbia UP, 2016. Print

Mookerjea, Debali. *Literature, Gender, and the Trauma of Partition: The Paradox of Independence*. UK: Taylor & Francis, 2017.

Morse, Janice. "Towards a Praxis Theory of Suffering". *Advances in Nursing Science* (2001): pp 47-59.

Schouler-Ocak, Meryam, ed. *Trauma and Migration: Cultural Factors in the Diagnosis and Treatment of Traumatised Immigrants*. German: Springer, 2015. Print

Showalter, Elaine. *A literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. UK: Princeton UP, 1999. Print

Walia, Shaloo. "Independence by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni | Book Review". *YouTube*, 12 Mar., 2023, <https://youtu.be/8entK9eQKDw>. Accessed on 15 May, 2023.