

Memories and Postmemories of the Partition of India

Anjali Gera Roy

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The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 meant a redrawing of the map that created new borders and borderlands in geographical spaces where none had existed before. It resulted in massive population migrations across the borders of the newly independent state of India and along West and East Pakistan. Over a million people died in communal conflicts and thousands of women faced horrifying sexual assault and trauma. Although ordinary people suffered the ordeals of displacement, violence and unrest, the dominant hegemonic structures of public memory of the Partition have never commemorated, for a long time, these lost voices through any memorial. However, in the last decades, scholarly engagements with 1947 have undergone a considerable change. We have seen formidable interventions in Partition Studies, although, as Joya Chatterji warns, there is a “gaping void at the heart of the subject” because one still does not know “why people who had lived cheek by jowl for so long fell upon each other in 1947 and its aftermath, with a ferocity that has few parallels in history” (311). In the late 1990s, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin noted that the abundance of political histories of the events was equalled by a “paucity of social histories of it” (6). Around the same time, Urvashi Butalia began to retrieve through interviews and oral narratives the stories of the smaller, invisible players of the events: the women and the children and the scheduled castes. Butalia’s contention was that we could not begin to understand what Partition was about “unless we look at how people remember it” (18). These works, as well as others like Kathinka Sinha Kerkhoff’s study of the Momins in Jharkhand, Sarah Ansari’s study of the Muslim refugees in Sind, Shail Mayaram’s study of the Meos in Rajasthan and Papiya Ghosh’s work on the Biharis in Bangladesh (to name but a few), all question the overarching uniformity of nationalist discourses and have marked a significant break from an exclusive concentration on high politics. Similarly, other studies have highlighted the complexities of the Partition to look at the representations of Dalits and minorities in the postcolonial act of nation building. Singular attention is now given to the sites where Partition has had a much deeper and long-term effect

– for example in the territorial enclaves along the national borders and in India’s Northeast. Within this body of scholarship, memories and memory studies have also become an important arena for those studying the affective dimensions of 1947, just as literature has been read as a new archive to explore the complexities of imaginative recuperations from trauma. Anjali Gera Roy’s book uses these alternative approaches to address the silence around 1947, focusing on the survivors who, unlike those of the Holocaust, do not take recourse to language to remember and memorialize their dead. Her work then is to focus on the “ethics and aesthetics of remembrance” by examining the value of memory studies. “What good,” she asks, “is the memory archive in view of memories being fallible, selective, affective, intuitive and corporeal? How can it deliver what history alone no longer seems to offer?” (2). Certainly, she sets herself a formidable task and she succeeds to a certain extent.

Gera Roy’s project however begins with a silence and a limitation. She examines the afterlife of the Partition as imprinted in the memories and post-memories of around 150 “largely upper class, upper caste Hindu and Sikh Punjabi and Sindhi, Hindu Bengali and some Muslim Ladakhi” (17) survivors. Amongst the respondents, the near total absence of Muslim and Dalit denizens from East Punjab who left to settle elsewhere or who remained, even in small numbers in villages and towns, is strange and unsettling. Of course a writer has every freedom to choose her field of study but an absence of testimonies from subaltern groups may open up an intellectual minefield in a memory project like this one. Does the legitimization of hegemony begin exactly where supposedly no such hegemony ought to exist, our remembrances of the very past that we seek to study? Gera Roy also limits her study to literary authors who are well known and disregards some others who could have served her thesis well. In the chapter titled “Memories of Lost Homes” she looks at Indo-Persian tradition of *shahr ashob* poetry where a poet laments a beloved lost city, but she does not look at Fikr Taunsvi’s (real name Ram Lal Bhatia) Partition journal *The Sixth River* to explore the resonance of the lost home for a whole generation of Partition writers writing in Urdu. Taunsvi’s narrative unearths the uncanny particularities of his sorrow at leaving Lahore, and his use of memory, irony and the practice of the everyday create what is one of the most remarkable eye-witness accounts to emerge out of the literary landscape of partitioned Punjab.

The book is divided into ten sections, including the Introduction. The first chapter, “Memory and History,” engages with the oft-traversed grounds of history, memory and narrative. The chapter “Intangible Violence” looks at the psychological and cultural disruptions faced by the survivors through the tools of trauma theory,

while “Scripting Their Own Lives” focuses on memory and post-memory in the narrativization of those experiences. The fourth chapter, “They Stuttered: Non-Narratives of the Unsayable,” uses Gilles Deleuze’s notion of language as a stutterer and Veena Das’s idea of the *unsayable* to foreground the silences and gaps in the narratives of the Partition. The fifth chapter deals with the idea of the uncanny in relation to displacement and resettlement, while the rest of the book is devoted to the configurations of “Home” both as an abstraction in memory and as reality within the new resettled place of sojourn through an alien landscape. The last two chapters, “Moving On” and “Partitioned Lives,” deal with the efforts of reconciliation and renewal of the survivors’ partitioned subjectivity as it subsumes and overwhelms the earlier markers of caste, gender, religion and language.

This volume can be useful to students of 1947 who are new to Partition Studies and there is some value in that. However, as an academic investigation that seeks to make a seminal contribution to the rich and diverse field of memory studies, it may leave its readers with a sense of unrealized promise.

Works Cited

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