

ERASURES AND DENIALS: CREATING AND RE-CREATING SELVES AND NATIONS IN THE PARTITION STORIES

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Abstract

The article analyzes how erasure and denial of reality becomes the only strategy of survival for many who had lived and survived the horrors of Partition. The event witnessed unspeakable brutality, bloodbath, massacre of thousands. In the stories the writers bring out the heart-wrenching experiences of their protagonists who are dislocated, uprooted and forced to move to new borders. They cannot leave the past, their familiar markers and move to a new country. Many became exiles, many chose to become mad, many lived in denial. Erasing the present, obliterating the new pressing realities became the only means through which people could cope up with the tragedy of losing loved ones, losing their homes and coping up with dishonour. In the three stories analyzed, “Toba Tek Singh” by Manto, “The Owner of Rubble” by Mohan Rakesh and “Thirst of Rivers” by Joginder Paul the protagonists go through a myriad of experiences and devise their own strategies to survive them.

The Partition was a watershed, a cataclysmic event that uprooted, dislocated, scarred and mutilated millions. While the nation at large was celebrating the hard-earned Independence, the creation of a new nation, and the barbaric atrocities that followed the Partition created bewilderment for many who did not know whether to participate in the euphoria or to mourn the loss of humanity and innocence. With a single stroke a new nation was born, boundaries were created that divided the nation, people, religious identities and even selves. For millions, this traumatic event continues to haunt even today. Generations have been scalded by the event. Writers writing the Partition feel challenged by the multiples issues they confront—coming to terms with the event at a political, social and individual level. These writers were trying to recreate the mass killings, the appalling rapes, the cumulative atrocities, the neurotic hatred, the depths of guilt and the maddening vengefulness while also trying to keep the humane concerns at the foremost. For both the writers and the survivors the attempt to grapple with the psychological scars was daunting and led to erasures of memory, denial of reality, and a frail nostalgic attempt to reconnect to their floundering past, their homes and their lost homeland. In Sadat Hasan Manto’s “Toba Tek Singh”, Joginder Paul’s “The Thirst of Rivers” and Mohan Rakesh’s “The Rubble-Owner” the protagonists live in a concerted attempt to deny reality and to erase pasts, haunted as they are by their troubled memory.

In their introduction to their volume of Partition stories, **Crossing Over**, editors Frank Stewart and Sukrita Paul Kumar, have talked about an unconscious attempt to indulge in “collective amnesia”. Denial of reality, obliterating the past and all its ramifications of guilt, despair, anger, vengefulness was a survival strategy, “From what depths would the refugee or the victim of rape, or the person who might have killed his neighbours be capable of mustering the fortitude to confront the gruesome past, especially when the present demands his or her full energy to construct a new home and a new identity?” [**Crossing Over**, xv] Erasing the past was probably the only route available to many to lead a new life with a new identity or a new self.

In many of the Partition stories the protagonists are coming to terms with their new realities and they find it difficult to compromise with their new roles or new selves. Remembering the dismembered past is a painful torture, hence the only recourse for them. For many leaving their homes, their cultural roots, shared memories, social networks, their ancestral bonds and crossing over to new unknown geographical locale, forge a new political identity, social regrouping, creating a new ethnic configuration or a moral order was traumatizing. Hence they desperately cling to the vestiges of their past even if it was a pile of rubble, which becomes a home. The protagonist in Mohan Rakesh’s story, “The Owner of Rubble” claims the pile of rubble as his own. Rakka Pahalwan had desired the house that belonged to Chiragdeen and so used the Partition riots as his frame to kill the family. The rubble to which the house was reduced, as somebody razed it to the ground, became his. He does not let anyone come near it, “He would neither anyone to tie a cow or a buffalo there, nor let anyone put a temporary shed. No one dared to take even a small piece of brick from the rubble without his permission.” [**Crossing Over**, 110] He claims to be the owner of it; hence when Abdul Gani returns after decades to visit what is now the remnants of his past, it is a threat to Rakka. The latter fears that there might be revelations; his guilt might be brought to light. He is confronting the man whom he had deeply wronged. He confronts his past once again; he is uneasy facing his guilt once again. He perspires, his body becomes taut and scared, “He wiped his face with one end of his towel. And then, quite involuntarily, he whispered to himself, “O dear God, have mercy on me, have mercy on me!” [**Crossing Over**, 112]. Gani is the visitor from the dark past who had come to haunt him once again. Despite his nonchalant responses to others trying to scare him of the exposure of truth of his crime, he fears dislocation from the pile of rubble that is his home now. It is a cathartic experience for him; he is reminded of his culpable crime with which he had come to an uneasy truce. His monosyllabic responses to Gani’s long-winded questions speak of his strange silence with his crime. After Gani leaves, Rakka recalls his visit to Vaishno Devi, as if to purge himself once again of his crime by recalling the pilgrimage. In his mind space he undertakes the journey once again to wash off his guilty past. There are indications that for the people living in the lane, the visit has exposed Rakka’s crime once again and reduced his stature of invincibility. The pile, his fortress, is no longer invincible as there are invasions and raids on it. As soon as the old man leaves, somebody ties his buffalo at Rakka’s, a dog barks and threatens to dispossess Rakka off the place. Trespassing had begun!

The rubble for Abdul Gani becomes the reunion with his son and his family who perished. There is nothing left but a pile of bricks, heap of dust, and some burnt pieces of brick and a door frame, the mute survivor of the carnage. Gani clings to the charred doorframe as if it sacred relic, in fact it is the only relic that tells him the story of the past. It is his reconnection with his son and family. The disintegrating frame, the crumbling door allows him to enter the burnt home, the scalded past and relive his tragic loss. For many like Gani, the visit is remembering the past and its little remains, of what they had left behind in Amritsar. The others

who came with Abdul Gani are looking for familiar landscapes, familiar faces in a strange land. They are strangers in the city which was once their beloved hometown. The familiar terrains have changed, “Look Fatehdina, how very few shops are left in Misri Bazaar!... A paanwallah now sits at the corner where Sukhi used to light her bhati....”. [**Crossing Over**, 104]. For the people of the city who have survived the Partition, have erased the uneasy past of their lives, the visit of these old men is a reminder of the past, there are anxious questions about the new nation and its old cities which many had left behind to relocate in another city.

Home was never simply a piece of land or a structure of brick and mortar but it was also the location that built ethnic identities and network of social harmonies. Chiragdeen refused to go despite the killings, arson and riots all around him. He claimed it was his lane, and people around him were his and that they would never harm him. He and his family were holding on to the house they had built, to the familiar spaces, to their old friends and acquaintances. They were impervious to the fires raging all around them.

For many writers the logic of creating a new nation, dividing a composite whole of a nation into two parts was an act of madness justified by the rhetoric of nationalism and harmony. The term insanity becomes a metaphor to refer to a period that defied all logic and witnessed catastrophic acts of violence and brutality. It becomes a symbol of the Partition. Sadat Hasan Manto uses madness as a motif in “Toba Tek Singh” to ridicule the incomprehensible logic that is forcefully inscribed on the people. The mental asylum becomes a metaphor for the two countries where absurd acts of violence, rape and bloodshed were committed; one atrocity answered by another heinous act. In fact the asylum seems to possess more logic than the insane rioting outside it and the frenzied rant outside it. In fact madness is also a strategy for those inside the asylum to erase the realities forced upon them; madness becomes a refuge for people who refuse to comprehend the sanity of the world outside. The protagonist in the story refuses to dawn an identity imposed by others. His name is ambivalent, his identity is unclear. This again becomes a fitting reply to the perpetrators of violence who were fixing a human being into a body with telling marks like a turban or a circumcision to infiltrate it and to violate it.

Manto’s protagonist lives in a world of emotional divides and the boundaries between sanity and insanity constantly blur and merge. There are inmates in the asylum who are not insane at all but use the asylum to cover their acts of criminality. By using these people and their wonderment and juxtaposing it with the apparent lack of sanity of the others, Manto creates a world of ambivalence where sanity and insanity constantly merge and flow into each other, which equates the porous boundaries created between the two nations that also seems to merge and blur or the emotional confusion it created for people, “if they were in Hindustan, then where was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how was it possible that only a short while ago they had been in Hindustan, when they had not moved from the place at all?” [**Translating Partition**, 65]. Another lunatic climbs up a tree saying that he does not want to belong to either Hindustan or Pakistan. Another lunatic mourns the fact that his nationality has changed, his identity is compromised. Spurned by her lover, he goes mad but even in his lunatic state of mind, he can comprehend that his mistress is in Amritsar but when he learns that Amritsar he is saddened that he has now become a Pakistani while she has become Hindustani.

Among the lunatics, the one who deviates from the others is a Sikh called Bhishen Singh, who calls himself Toba Tek Singh. He has curiously adopted the name of his hamlet as his own. It became his name, his real identity; his agitated mind and body never slept in the fifteen years that he had lodged the asylum and when he did, he chose to sleep forever it was the no-man’s land. He refused to step into the borders of either nation. The location of his hamlet is not known

either. Its ambivalence adds to the hazy logic of the Partition or its division of boundaries, “Sialkot, which earlier had been in Hindustan, was now reported to be in Pakistan. Who knew whether Lahore, which was now in Pakistan, would not go over to Hindustan the following day, or the whole of Hindustan would not turn into Pakistan?” [Translating Partition, 67] When the lunatics are exchanged on the Wagah border, confusion and chaos prevails; the border becomes the metaphor for the entire country where nobody knew what was happening, why it was happening or where everything was leading on to, “they could not make out why they were being uprooted from their homes.” [Translating Pakistan, 70]. Bhishan Singh refuses to budge from a rooted spot where he cements himself. They try his best to convince him that his town had merged in Hindustan but that does not convince him. Even the narrative creates ambiguity as it merges the identity of the protagonist with the hamlet so completely that they become inseparable, “They tried their best to persuade him that Toba Tek Singh had already gone to Hindustan or would be sent there immediately.” [Translating Partition, 70] The officials give up all efforts to convince and let him stand in the no-man’s land because uprooted from one place, Toba Tek Singh belongs to neither of the countries. In the morning they see him lying on his face, “Over there, behind the barbed wires was Hindustan. Over here, behind identical wires lay Pakistan, in between, on a bit of a land that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh.” [Translating Partition, 70] He decides that he belongs to neither of the countries that he is forced to choose and so does his hamlet participate in the mindless boundaries that were created for no apparent reason. The world outside the asylum was senseless, demonic and mad.

For many the act of remembering or recollecting the past is so painful that they deny the painful and traumatic past and choose only to retain only the past that the reminds them of their pleasant and harmonious days. So memory constantly erases and obliterate. Erasure and nostalgic clinging go together for many. The story “The Thirst of Rivers” is another one that recounts the experience of exile, nostalgia, denial of reality and erasures of new realities very poignantly. The old woman, in the story, has erased the boundaries between the old country she was forced to leave and the new one she is compelled to adopt by carrying the only remnant of her past with her. She does not part with the keys of her huge haveli, and across the border she tries to open the new house with the keys of her haveli. She is thus locked in the past, the past peopled by her husband, her young son, other relatives, celebrations and all other such romantic, pleasant associations. For her, the dead husband is still lodged in the haveli and so are other associations. He still commands her. There is a constant dialogue with him, which helps the narrative to recall the major events of her life, bring in the past and present together and recount very poignantly the exiled status of Bebe. Lying on the cot outside parallels her exile experience, she is never inside but always outside.

Her vision has become quite hazy, “But what can one do when a veil of the past perpetually hangs over one’s eyes.” [Translating Partition, 80] The narrative also blurs the past and the present making it fluid, and this fluidity helps the writer to merge time, to bring in the lunatic’s refusal to demarcate and compartmentalize time. Again the fluidity and the madness parallel the madness of the period and the fluid states of mind that many were living in. The borders too become fluid as many carried their homes, their villages, cities into the new location. The haveli in this context becomes the motif of the new nations that could easily be carried in the mind-spaces of the people. How any city could be contained in its place when memory let it carry it everywhere!

She is seen as mad and she is reliving her past, never letting it go. Her mind echoes the past and the entire narrative is a recall of the voices that also recounts the major incidents of her

life. She is still living in her memories, denying the new realities, refusing to erase the past. Among all these the most potent of her signpost is the bunch of keys that she has carried for decades, “The iron of the keys had grown rounded and fleshy from the weight of the soft abrasion of her fingers for the last fifty years.”[**Translating Partition**, 80] She is so fixated in the haveli that she was forced to leave at the time of Partition, that the efforts of others to convoke her become vain, “How can I convince you that we have left out haveli, our village, and country across the border. We left them several years ago. But you still dwell there.”[**Translating Partition**, 83] With the same keys she tries to unlock the door of her son’s new house. The effort is vain and the door refuses to open. With her locked vision of the past, she cannot open the doors of the present.

Thus the stories recount a constant eroding of the past that goes on in the mind of the protagonist. Erasures and denials become their psychic condition. They have erased the new realities and stubbornly deny them. Hence while the newly- created boundaries are erased, new realities emerge that clashes with the existent realities. Often the new realities are the figment of the frenzied imagination of their protagonists, hence not trustworthy, but these probably are the only modes of survival for the harrowed and tormented souls that have witnessed and borne untold horrors and unthinkable crimes.

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