



13

**REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY PARTITION
FICTION: A STUDY OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S
INDEPENDENCE**

Dr. Soumana Biswas

Assistant Professor in English

K. K. Das College,

University of Calcutta, W.B., India

Abstract:

Partition divided the country and it was rather a bloody division with the Partition riots which led to the killing and massacre of both human lives and property. The worst sufferers among them were the women of all communities. Their suffering was double-ended as their body was looked upon as sites of honour and they suffered rape, abduction, forced marriage, mutilation, branding with nationalist slogans at the hands of men from the other community as well as their own family members. Partition fiction have long taken up the function of depicting the suffering of women. In this paper, I propose to analyse diasporic writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's recent novel Independence published in 2022 which presents a saga of sisterhood in the backdrop of India's independence and Partition. I will try to look at the way in which Divakaruni has attempted to portray the women characters in the novel as strong characters who in their own right try to create an identity for themselves by being self-sufficient. She includes the narrative of women freedom fighters in her novel in an attempt to portray women's contribution to the freedom struggle. Hence, this paper will attempt to demonstrate the change in the representation of women in Partition fiction-the change from only being victims to being makers of their own destiny.

Keywords: *Partition, Women, Identity, Freedom, Diaspora, etc.*

Partition is the founding trauma which accompanied the independence of the country from British rule in the year 1947. Though the nationalist narratives about independence celebrate the freedom from subordination under British rule, these narratives in turn suppress the plight of people that resulted from the Partition. Partition was not simply demarcating the division of the land; it also meant the division of people. The nation of Pakistan was formed with the idea of a pure land for the Muslims and the sudden drawing of borders led to the displacement of thousands of people. The notion of 'home' changed in an instant and many people who called a particular place their home for generations suddenly found out that they had to leave everything behind and migrate to a new country which would be their 'home'. This led to the disruption of normal life and even led to growing tensions between communities which in turn led to conflicts. These conflicts took the form of riots in which many lives were lost. .



The 1990s, especially the year 1998, witnessed the publication of testimonies in Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries*. In these works, the survivors spoke for themselves in their own voices. These works focused especially on the plight of women as they were the ones who suffered not only at the hands of people from other communities but also at the hands of the members of their own family. Faisal Fareed and Shah Alam in an article published on 15th August, 2021 entitled *Gendered Violence and the Horrors of Partition: The Price Paid by Women* published in *The Wire* writes: "Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon, in their book *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* revealed that the official number of the number of women who were abducted while on their way to Pakistan stands at 50,000, while 33,000 women were abducted as they attempted to migrate to India. In her book *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia provided similar statistics and claimed that 75,000 women were abducted from both sides of the border. However, it is presumed that the actual numbers may vary as many incidents went unnoticed and unrecorded because of the tumultuousness of the times" (Fareed & Alam, 2021). In case of the works of Butalia, and Menon and Bhasin, the focus of their works is on providing a voice to the suppressed voices of the women (specifically in Menon and Bhasin), children and people from the margin who suffered during the Partition. The Partition riots that accompanied the independence of the country saw various atrocities and among the worst sufferers during these riots were the women. The women have always been looked upon as bearers of honour and respectability not only of the family that they belong to but also of the entire community or religion. The members of both the Hindu and Muslim communities thought that hurting and mutilating the women of the other community would ensure ruining the respectability of that community. Thus the women were abducted, raped, mutilated and their body parts branded with religious slogans.

The women of both the communities became victims of violence and their bodies became the site of the battle for honour. Sukrita Paul Kumar has commented: "It is well-known how control over women's sexuality is perpetuated through male protection of the community's honour, which is, of course, inscribed on the bodies of women" (Kumar, 2004, p. 99). What is worse is that the women were killed by their own male family members or they committed suicide in order to save their honour. The family members go on to valorize the death of the women of their family and justify their 'murder' by saying that they did so in order to save the honour of the women as well as the honour of the family. Since the honour of the family rested on the shoulders or rather the 'body' of the women, they had to remain pure and that could be done if it could be ensured that they were dead before they were abducted or raped. The women who chose to kill themselves were even hailed as martyrs and they gained a certain status in society in terms of courage and honour and the families from which women were abducted or lost were somewhat poor in terms of the currency of honour. Some among them were married to their abductors and some even rejected by their own family members. The Rehabilitation Programme which was conducted by the governments of both the countries focused on returning the women to their respective families but in many cases the families refused to recognize them as they believed that they had become impure because of their close proximity with the 'other'. The plight of these women are mentioned nowhere in the official or historical narratives as there has been a constant attempt to eradicate any contradictory claims



to the glorious nature of the independence of the country. But the absence from official narratives does not make the suffering of these women any less painful. The works of Butalia, Menon and Bhasin focus on restoring the voices of these women to the realm of Partition historiography.

Apart from the testimonies of women, Partition fiction has also taken up the function of depicting the plight of the women during the Partition. Women's suffering ranging from abduction, rape, mutilation, forced marriage---all have been depicted in the works of various writers of Partition fiction. These works have tried to provide voice and depict those silenced narratives of women in the pages of history.

Saadat Hasan Manto in his hard hitting style has written short stories like *Thanda Gosht*, *Khol Do* where he portrays the immense physical and psychological trauma that women underwent and how human beings had turned inhuman during the maddening times of the Partition riots. *Thanda Gosht* or *Cold Meat* presents the narrative of Ishwar Singh who cannot make love to his lover Kalwant and it is later discovered that he was involved in Partition riots and had ended up killing a Muslim family. The tragic truth that is discovered later is that he had abducted and attempted to rape a girl from the Muslim family without realizing that she was already dead. This depicts the manner in which women were looked upon as objects for the gratification of sexual lust and may be were not even spared in death. 'Khol Do' or 'Open It' is another such story where a young girl named Sakina, the daughter of Sirajuddin goes missing when the train they were traveling on is attacked by rioters. The people who form a search party to rescue Sakina are the ones who rape her and leave her to die near the refugee camp where her father is residing. Later Sirajuddin finds his daughter who is barely conscious in the doctor's office and is seen opening her salwar expecting to be raped again when the doctor utters the word 'Khol do' or 'Open it'. The doctor had wanted someone to open the window of his chamber but the psychological trauma was so deeply imprinted on the mind of the poor girl that she automatically started to undress herself. Both the stories depict the depravity of human nature and how women became victims of such depravity.

Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti* is another such story that talks about Sunder Lal who works for the rehabilitation of abducted women to their families and is a strong advocate for the cause. His wife Lajwanti had also been abducted during the Partition riots but later she comes back from across the border after having lived with a Muslim man, Jumman. Though Sunder Lal takes her back to his house, he never accepts her as his wife and starts treating her like a goddess. This is Sunder Lal's way of avoiding any sort of relationship with his wife whom he now considers impure after having lived with another man from another community. Amrita Pritam's Punjabi novel *Pinjar* also depicts the plight of a girl named Puro who is abducted by a man named Rashid and when Puro manages to escape the clutches of Rashid, her parents refuse to accept her. To her parents, she had been defiled. Similarly Jyotirmoyee Devi's Bengali novel *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, translated as *The River Churning* involves the story of Sutara, a girl from a middle class family in East Bengal who loses her parents in the Partition riots and whose brothers refuse to accept her after she is abducted by the Muslims and later sheltered in the house of a Muslim man. Debali Mookerjee-Leonard in 'Quarantined: Women and the Partition' talks about "how women sexually abused by the rival community in



the riots of Partition, unless excluded from the nation, become representatives of the fallen nation” (Mookerjea-Leonard, 2004).

Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *Ice Candy Man* which was later published as *Cracking India* also depicts the way in which the child protagonist Lenny’s ayah is abducted by a Muslim mob and how she ends up in the clutches of prostitution. Shauna Singh Baldwin’s novel *What the Body Remembers* is also significant in the way it represents the issue of gendered violence against women and how the family members of the women killed them in the name of honour. Baldwin’s novel is a testimony to the nationalist agenda played out on women’s bodies where the family and by extension the nation’s respect is bound to that of the respect of women.

In this paper, I have chosen Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s 2022 novel *Independence* for analysis in an attempt to understand whether there has been any change in the depiction of the plight of women in Partition narratives. All the various works based on Partition that have been mentioned depict the way in which women were victims at the hands of men who were either members of their own family or were members of the other community. Divakaruni’s recent novel portrays a change in the way she depicts the women characters. The novel does not show the women as mere victims but as makers of their own destiny. The novel traces the journey of three sisters-Deepa, Jamini and Priya in the backdrop of the independence and Partition of India. The novel starts in the month of August in the year 1946 and is set in a fictional village called Ranipur in colonial Bengal. The three sisters and their various struggles are paralleled with the struggle for India’s independence. Divakaruni has named the chapters of the novel by the names of the three sisters and it signifies the fact that they are the heroines of the story and ones around which the narrative will revolve.

The three sisters are the daughters of a doctor named Nabakumar Ganguly who has dedicated his life to the service of the poor and is killed in the communal riots which take place on Direct Action Day while trying to help a patient in his Calcutta clinic, situated in the crowded Park Circus area. Nabakumar is mostly fond of his youngest daughter Priya who shares his passion of helping the poor and aspires to become a doctor. Though Nabakumar “loves expanding his daughter’s horizons” (Divakaruni, 2022, p. 9), he is not too keen on sending his daughter to study medicine as he says she would have to face various hardships in medical school due to the prejudice against women. Nabakumar is not only shown as a dedicated doctor but also someone who has been involved in non-violent movement of Gandhiji. His daughter Priya also inherits his love for the country and has a keen interest in politics. Priya undergoes a lot of hardships but never gives up on her dream of becoming a doctor. She receives help from her father’s closest friend Somnath Chowdhury, the zamindar of the village and even goes to America to pursue her studies for a medical degree. Priya is depicted as a talented young girl who has a zeal for life and even gives up on the love of her life Amit, the zamindar’s son who wanted her to stay back in India and pursue her studies from Calcutta Medical College. Even after her father’s death, Priya does not lose hope but rather becomes stronger in her resolve: “Take care of them you said to me, Baba. I made a promise. I must keep it. Stand on my own feet like the women you admired, Matangini 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” (Divakaruni, 67). Priya does not want a man to solve her problems and is adamant to continue the legacy of her father. At the end of the novel, Priya is



shown to have taken charge of her father's village clinic where she is valued for being a lady doctor. Priya establishes a lucrative practice for herself but does not give up on her philanthropic work where she continues treating the poor for free.

Divakaruni presents the characters of the three sisters as starkly different from one another but each one of them has a talent which helps them survive in life. Deepa, the eldest daughter of Nabakumar and his wife Bina, was a dutiful daughter. She was the most beautiful out of the three and also was the most practical and everyone was sure that she would find a good match in marriage. But Divakaruni shows her falling in love with the young doctor and Muslim League enthusiast Raza, who is the nephew of Nabakumar's friend and partner in running his Calcutta clinic, Abdullah. Deepa has to take up the name of Aliya Begum to survive and marry Raza after being disowned by her mother after she learns about her relationship with Raza. After the country is partitioned, Raza moves to East Pakistan with Deepa where they settle in a house left behind by a Hindu family. Raza takes up an important bureaucratic position in East Pakistan but creates enmity with a military leader, Mamoon. Raza ends up getting killed by a trap laid by Mamoon just a few months after the birth of his daughter, Sameera and Mamoon starts pressuring Deepa to marry him. Deepa establishes herself as a radio artist singing songs that charm the masses—one of the talents that she possesses. Deepa somehow manages to send a message to her sisters via Abdullah to come and rescue her and her sisters embark on a risky journey across the border to bring back Deepa to India. Deepa is shown in the beginning of the novel as an efficient woman who helps to strike a good deal for her mother's hand stitched 'kanthas' or quilts with the sellers in New Market. Her business acumen is shown to be put in use when at the end of the novel, Deepa takes charge of Somnath's estate in the absence of his heir, Amit. Divakaruni depicts the women taking charge of situations and making an identity of their own. Deepa, like Priya, loses the love of her life, Raza but emerges stronger than before for the sake of her daughter and herself.

Jamini, the middle daughter of Nabakumar, is the most subservient and the least appreciated out of the three sisters. But she is also shown to possess the talent of singing and is depicted as a practical person who helps the family survive in tough times. After the death of their father when the family falls into an economic lurch, Jamini is the one who prudently saves every morsel of food and feeds the entire family on meagre supplies. Jamini also shares the talent of her mother Bina in stitching and helps Bina in creating complicated designs with vibrant colours. By the end of the novel, Bina and Jamini contribute money to the Chowdhury household with their income from selling their quilts to sellers in Calcutta. It is Jamini who comes up with the most daring plan in the rescue operation of Deepa. She had planned to take the place of Deepa and sacrifice herself for her sake. It is Amit who saves Jamini but ends up getting killed by a shot fired by Mamoon's men.

Coincidentally it is Jamini and Bina who become victims of the communal riots which take place in their village. Bina is seriously injured and Jamini is almost on the verge of getting raped when Amit arrives at the scene and saves them. Their house is burnt and they start residing in the residence of the Chowdhurys. Amit marries Jamini at the request of Bina but he can never accept her wholeheartedly as he always loved Priya.



All the prominent male characters, Nabakumar, Amit and Raza perish in the novel --- the father figure in a communal strife in Calcutta, the second in East Pakistan while trying to rescue Deepa and the other becomes a victim of a conspiracy. All the three sisters lose the men in their lives but they become stronger individuals in the process. All three sisters are depicted as self-sufficient women who do not require men to protect them or provide for them. Even though Divakaruni presents challenging situations for all the three sisters, she never lets them become the victims of the situation and thus does not portray only the suffering of the women characters. Priya is one who “refuses to believe that a woman cannot have the joys of home and also a place in the world” (Divakaruni, 209). It seems as if Divakaruni is redefining the idea of a joyous home where the women at the end of the novel are shown to be stable in their lives with each being self-sufficient. She no longer depicts the man as the provider and the well-being of the women as dependant on the men. As India gains independence, the three sisters also establish their lives on their own terms.

Divakaruni brings the character of Sarojini Naidu alive in the novel and thus depicts the contribution of the female freedom fighters in India’s struggle for independence. Sarojini Naidu’s words to Priya sum up Divakaruni’s attempt to depict strong women characters: “You are a daughter of Independence, the country’s future. Women like you are the ones for whom 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” (Divakaruni, 278).

Divakaruni is a diasporic writer and a writer who has not experienced Partition herself and is writing about the Partition based on the knowledge she has received through history, testimonies, first generation literature. The temporal distance of the author and the event of Partition allows the author to analyse the various ways in which Partition has been depicted in previous works of fiction. Thus a significant change can be noticed in Divakaruni’s Partition fiction as she does not restrict the depiction of the women as sufferers of gendered violence as found in earlier Partition fiction. There is also a significant shift from looking at women bodies as sites of honour and rather looking at women as individuals who can face any hardship and come out victorious and even be the flag bearer of the future of the country.

References

- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. 2022. *Independence*. Harper Collins Publishers India. Print.
- Fareed, Faisal & Alam, Shah. 2021. Gendered Violence and the Horrors of Partition: The Price Paid by Women. *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in/history/gendered-violence-and-the-horrors-of-partition-the-price-paid-by-women>. Web.
- Kumar, Sukrita Paul. 2004. *Narrating Partition: Texts, Interpretations, Ideas*. Indialog Publications Pvt. Ltd. Print.
- Mookerjea-Leonard, Debali. 2004. Quarantined: Women and the Partition. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 24(1), 33-46. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/comparative_studies_of_south_asia_africa_and_the_middle_east/v024/24.1_mookerjea-leonard.pdf. Web.

Literary Cognizance

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online) Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)

An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism

Vol.- V, Issue- 1, June 2024



This is an Open Access e-Journal Published Under A Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

To Cite the Article: Biswas, Soumana. "Representation of Women in Contemporary Partition Fiction: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Independence". Literary Cognizance, V - 1 (June, 2024): 95-101. Web.

