

Borders, Nation and Religion framing the identity in *Pinjar* and *The Skeleton*

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Introduction

Stuart Hall rightly states that

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead of identity as a 'Production,' which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation.

Hence, it is always in a state of 'becoming'. Thus, it can never be static. Does that mean that the great wars fought were meaningless, or that our own history of Partition loses its validation?

Partition in a post-colonial world was a residue of colonization and had religion as its base leading to the Hindu- Muslim divide. To further concretize it, the imaginary line drawn between the two Nation States was called 'Border'. The paper attempts to problematize the concept of identity which is governed by the border, by nation and religion in the film *Pinjar* and the book '*The Skeleton*' by Khushwant Singh. What these borders and new formed nations created was new subjects and new subject positions. Thus borders became the inscription of a new identity and the center of the making of new histories. The problem of national identity is colonial in nature since the question "Where am I?" is the question that comes with the narrative of the nation-building process. Somehow, the new making of history and memory was not easy and that is what my other section of the paper will examine: how these borders became identifiable as the locus of violence. To bring in

the concept of agency of women becomes inevitable while discussing partition.

‘Nation’ and ‘nationalism’ became most pronounced after World War II in Third World fiction. The ‘nation’ is precisely what Foucault called a ‘discursive formation’—not simply an allegorical or imaginative vision, but a gestative political structure which the Third World artist is consciously building or suffering the lack of: “Nationalism is a trope for ‘belonging’, ‘bordering’, and ‘commitment’”(Ashcroft). The actual threat that lies with the border is the perils of crossing it; it is subversive and filled with excitement and dread. Border-crossing can be seen as an act of transgression because it shows how porous and inherently unstable the national frontier is. People in their back and forth movement question the very existence of the border and an identity that gets fixated with the imaginary divisive line, for if pretenses like maps and borders come to define any nation-state then it becomes a site not only to be ‘imagined’ but also to be challenged. This spatial distance is unknown and unrepresentable. It is disjuncted and bears the memories of displacement, dislocation and compulsive migration; it becomes a site that remembers what is forgotten, or a residue of the imagined nation that promises no return to the present as Bhabha says:

The present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities.

A territorial imagination specific in nature could result in national borders, according to Benedict Anderson, which may render these national imaginings as unstable. For example, what happens, when national borders do not relate to the contours of the imagined nation or when a redefinition of the nation is imposed on a national identity by an unimagined

divisive line? As the paper mainly attempts to deal with religion and its role in nation building, we will focus primarily on the latter part of the novel and the film. In the film, when Hamida asks her husband Rashida, “What was happening outside?”, Rashida answers, “Partition”. She is shocked at the remark and asks, “Where am I?” This reflects the unfixity of one’s ‘nation’, which was India at some point in time but is now Pakistan, and also the unfixity of an identity claimed by one’s nationality.

Borders become the embodiment of the past, which haunts its present; “A national border of this kind — unimagined and forced by violence — becomes then a space of excess, the repository of what is denied or inarticulate in the discourse of the nation” (Ashcroft). Partition, like ‘Trace’, became the locus of erasure of the origin (Nation). That nation did not disappear, as it never existed, but led to the genesis of identities. When I say that the concept of a nation did not exist beforehand, I am talking about the new imagined geopolitical space that claims to be one. Religion serves as a catalyst for the violence and the violation of human bodies. The paper attempts to draw our attention to the fact that religion masks the pluralistic notion of a nation and emphasizes the monolithic construct of a nation.

With the new nation-building process came the exclusion of a specific religion, gender, and class. Borders can be the death of a nation and also a region of possibilities wherein a new state comes into being. This is where the flexibility of identity comes into play. Are these people ‘Pakistanis’ or ‘Hindustanis’? Do they carry a ‘trace’ of both their identities? Border formation leads to a series of dramatic events, for example, neurotic nationalism, quest for identity or vice-versa, and finally looks for its validation through violence, coercion and Ideological state Apparatuses (religion being one of the important factors). It reminds us of the incompleteness and incompetency of British rule.

Borders: A Possibility:

Benedict Anderson says that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contacts are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by the falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined”(Anderson). Religion becomes the defining factor in the framing of a nation. Religion takes on a monolithic image:

In a feverish stillness, the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (Bhabha)

For example, when Ram Chand escorts his family, the Indian police van arrives and they ask the ‘Indians’ to march on their side. A new identity is forged and that domestic site recedes into the past and this newly formed identity displaces the border between their home and the world. It is confusing and uncanny; the private and public are part of each other yet are divided because the very act of ‘protection’ of Hindus on the land they once called ‘Home’ becomes ‘foreign’ to them. So when one talks about the nation as a separate entity and a static body we are compelled to question the very idea because a handful of people turn out to be victims in that foreign land whereas the same land becomes less threatening when these policemen arrive. The concept of ‘home’ is born and a new place comes into being on the same land. Thus we see nation, religion, border, and power go hand in hand;

‘Hamida met her brother, knowing that this was to be at the same time their first and their last meeting; that an hour of reunion would be followed by a final separation...a while Ram Chand answered: “Poooro, do not shame us in this way.”Lajo’s husband could not bring himself to say anything

– nor perhaps had he paid attention to what they were saying. “He was not only meeting the wife he had lost, he was also meeting a sister he had lost before he was old enough to remember. All these years a fire of hate had smoldered within him. He had used a spark from that fire to consume Rashida’s harvest and reduced it to ashes. And now the same long-lost sister was there, sitting in front of him. He overlooked the fact that Rashida had rescued his wife, Lajo; his mind only dwelt on the fact that Rashida had abducted his sister. The police van was ready. An Indian constable shouted: “All Hindus going over to India, come this side! The bus is ready!” (Pritam)

‘Pinjar’ highlights the falsity of nationhood and nationalism by the sheer violence it demands in the separation of two countries. It not only projects how nationalism is a false construct but also how religion becomes a pawn in human hands to validate power and rule. How do we define ‘home’ in a post-partition world? This move towards the bureaucratisation, homogenisation and freezing of cultures, facilitated and ensured by a state power existing above the multitude of atomic individuals, who, in their turn, paradoxically, constitute the natural, moral communities to be defended, is perhaps the most important hallmark of political history and political endeavor over the last two centuries:

Nationalism is the pathology of modern developmental history, as inescapable as “neurosis” in the individual, with much the same essential ambiguity attaching to it, a similar built-in capacity for a descent into dementia rooted in the dilemmas of helplessness thrust upon most of the world and largely incurable.

Be it the movie *Pinjar* or *Earth 1947*, the inescapable neurosis is explicit and the dilemma of a formed static nation comes with the history of colonization so people keep practicing nation as Bhabha would say

by forming religion as its base, something that results in the kind of violence visibilized in the novel *Pinjar* by Amrita Pritam and its film adpatation. According to Benedict Anderson, “Nation is an imagined political community. It is imagined as both inherently limited”. The identity of the Nation cannot stand on its own. It draws its recognition from the religious, socio-political and economic stance of a country. The film and the novel talk about how religion molds the construction of a so-called “sovereign” community i.e. the very concept of a nation was born in an age in which the divinely ordained was at stake due to the revolution and enlightenment.

The audience senses the tensions of partition from the very beginning of the film when people are seen standing in front of vehicles with their luggage in a queue suggestive of migration taking place. In the novel, however, the theme of partition is introduced a little later and remains as the backdrop, though Hindu-Muslim tension is established from the very beginning. It is just that the sheer brutality in its naked form is dealt with in the latter part: “In some cities, barricades were put up to divide the Muslim zones from the Hindu. News came of.... many had died in India, many had fallen by the wayside and many had succumbed to their wounds after the journey was over ” (34).

The reader can feel the tension of separation that would have left a lifetime scar on the bodies of communities which is why nation is something that is

imagined because ‘regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always considered as a deep horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is the fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries for so many millions of people, not so much to kill as willingly but to die for such limited ‘imagining. (Anderson)

The 'dying' is symbolic and literal in *Pinjar* and in any other partition saga.

Moving onto the second section of my paper, how a woman's body is cartographed in the process of constructing a nation, I would also be problematizing the notion of agency. *Pinjar* is, as Gyanendra Pandey writes, "a survivor's account between history and memory". He suggests that

When history is written as a history of struggle, it tends to exclude the dimensions of force, uncertainty, domination and disdain, loss and confusion, by normalizing the struggle, evacuating it of its messiness... I wish to ask how one might write a history of an event involving genocidal violence, following all the rules and procedures of disciplinary 'objective' history.

The novel clearly brings out the gendered nature of the struggle and captures the trauma of partition on a personal front instead of bringing out a communal consciousness. Beerendra Pandey writes, "An exploration of the language of trauma in Indian English partition fiction reveals the presence of cultural trauma in fictional representation - a presence this functions as a memory to settle old scores rather than a way to escape from the cycle of communal violence." I will be using trauma theory to support my argument on violence against women and the community during partition. As Freud said, "melancholia as characteristic of an arrested process in which the depressed and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, remains narcissistically identified with the lost object." The novel moves ahead in non-linear time: it begins with the present and shifts to flashback wherein a pregnant Pooro is seen reminiscing her past and lamenting her present. We see Pooro locked throughout in a compulsive repetition of her lost self. Even later, Hamida who was once Pooro, mourns her lost identity when she is to marry a young handsome man Ramchand. Pooro here is the lost object/self with

which Hamida narcissistically identifies. Cathy Caruth states that “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.” The very act of reminiscing can be seen as traumatic because her every effort to come out of the situation is suppressed when she identifies herself with the other female bodies like that of the madwomen, Lajo and Kammo . For her, survival is a traumatic experience as it entails the painful remembering of the past. These female bodies collectively become the embodiment and the site of suffering and violence: “It was a double life. Hamida by day, Pooro by night. In reality, she was neither one nor the other; she was just a skeleton without a shape or a name” (39).

Pooro is symbolic of many other women who were destined to a similar fate as we see later in the novel and in the film. A sense of loss and rupture can be felt, and the novel becomes a work of trauma. It mourns partition by portraying the struggle and violence suffered by the community and the women. We can say that by projecting Pooro’s and other women’s struggle into the event of partition, it collectivizes the experience of trauma. In this sense, *Pinjar* is a “the study of the fragmented identity of the self on the basic levels of community and nationhood. Trauma shatters the well- ordered identity of a group or community or nation.”

The film and the novel highlight how women become the bearers of honor and identity for both the nation and the community. Hence, to negotiate their spaces within patriarchy and communalism becomes crucial. While negotiating, the use of agency becomes an important phenomenon. According to Kumkum Sangari the notion of “women’s agency remains problematic both in theory and practice because women are class-differentiated and subject to frequent cross-class expansion of patriarchal ideologies, their agency is not open to historically self-evident modes of collectivization”. Thus women are conditioned to sanctioned

forms of agency which functions within the domain of patriarchy. For example, when Pooro, in her maternal home destined to marry a man of her father's choice is abducted by a Muslim man Rashida, she has to abide by the laws made by him and does not have a stand in society. She negotiates that which can be understood as a sanctioned form of an agency when she goes to look for Ramchand in his fields. Later when she aborts her own child, she tries to validate her control over her body but what one must realise is that in the process of exercising control she ends up hurting herself and loses a part of her own. However, when Pooro escorts Lajjo (who was abducted by Muslim men during migration), she is questioned about her identity. She shows them the tattoo of her name on her arm, thus highlighting the absurdity of a religion that is limited to markers and clothing. Women like Pooro, Madwoman, Lajjo, and Kammo defy the patriarchal construct of religion and nation by coming together in a moment of crisis; the naked madwoman's refusal to wear clothes whether in direct or indirect form can be seen as a stripping off of any religious identity. Her madness is symbolic of the insanity that prevailed across borders and is an important trope in most partition sagas whereas her death anticipates the death of a nation.

Also, Hamida/Pooro is seen to have lost her identity as an individual in the film to some extent as she gets to witness the events of partition through a membranous layer of Rashida's narration whereas in the novel she is the one who witnesses the violence of partition when she sees men collecting axes and steel weapons and shouting, "We will be free; We will have our own government".

Unlike the novel, the film follows a linear time-line where the scenes shift gradually from a peaceful homely set-up to a tensed communal environment, beginning with Pooro's abduction by Rashida: "Just as a peeled orange falls apart into many segments, the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs of the Punjab broke away from each other" (33). This is the result of the melancholic nature of cultural trauma rooted in revenge and identity

politics. The falling apart of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs represents the production of new biopolitical bodies. In the end, when Pooro refuses to go back to her family, is she conforming to patriarchy, or is she trying to break through? She ironically comments, “When it had happened [to Hamida], religion had become an insurmountable obstacle;And now, the same religion had become so accommodating” (39). There is grief and relief in these lines: she was happy for the women who returned to their homes but also mourns for herself and the event that had caused so many deaths. Through *Pinjar*, Amrita Pritam brings the most vulnerable bodies into the light. These are mostly the female bodies who become the site of contest and violence.

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