

Lamenting Loss, Trauma, and the Memories of Partition: Evaluating 'Partition Poetry'

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Abstract

The term 'partition poetry' refers to the poems being written on both sides of the border in the aftermath of the distressing event of partition of India, recorded in the history as 'partition', in the memory 'a wound that would take years to heal'. The massive communal violence, displacement, and the loss of million lives transformed the human perception of life. The potential of poetry to soothe the tormented heart and express the agonies from the deepest chambers of heart attracted poets to take up the subject and express the emotional and psychological impact of the historical event on individuals, families, and communities. The present paper attempts to study the silences and moans forwarded by poets, like, Amrita Pritam, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, and Gulzar and it appreciates their honest attempts to decode the psychological dismantling undergone by the masses, equally, on both sides of the border. This paper establishes understanding of partition poetry as a medium of documenting history, processing trauma, and voicing the unarticulated emotions of a generation. Furthermore, this study is an attempt to delve into the evolution of partition poetry over time, from the aftermath to its continued relevance today. This paper endeavours to investigate the themes of healing and resilience dealt in later works, thus, signifying a hopeful reconciliation of the past and the present.

Key words: Partition Poetry, Memory, Trauma, South Asian Literature.

The partition of India in 1947 marked one of the most traumatic events in the history of the Indian subcontinent. As borders were redrawn, millions of people were displaced, and communal violence erupted, leaving scars that endure to this day. In the aftermath of this cataclysmic event, poets emerged as chroniclers of the pain, loss, and resilience experienced by those who lived through the partition. Partition poetry became a powerful medium for expressing the complex emotions and grappling with the shattered reality of a divided nation. At the heart of partition poetry lies a raw and visceral response to the upheaval that accompanied the division of India into two independent nations, India and Pakistan. Poets, often witnesses to the communal violence and mass migrations, became the chroniclers of a painful reality. Poetry in the hands of such poets emerged as a gateway of understanding the sentiments of the masses on the either side of the border. The Wordsworthian claim that poetry is an infusion of emotions and thoughts that holds the potential to strongly appeal to the sensibilities affected by the worldly encounters has been realized in the verses composed by poets like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Amrita Pritam, Agyey, Gulzar and many more. These poets had one thing they shared in common- their overflowing passionate emotions regarding the event of partition on how it morphed and distorted the identities across the border. The nature of the grief was the common denominator over which they carved the deepest agonies of suffering hearts. The partition that exists in history books today and one that curtailed the normal lives of a large population along the lines can hardly be brought together to

comparison. It is in the poetry that the essential perturbation can be felt and the emotional dishevelled could find a register. The works of these poets, therefore, actualize the unheard lament of the losses sustained through generations and the present paper appreciates the works of the aforementioned poets as articulations providing impetus to the muffled and weakened voices that have a different story to tell than what history preaches. Urvashi Butalia in her seminal work *The Other Side of Silence (1998)*, writes that there was a large rift between the politically declared public partition and the tolls it took on the private lives, the dismantled subjectivities in the due course. She says,

This is the generality of Partition: it exists publicly in history books. The particular is harder to discover; it exists privately in the stories told and retold inside so many households in India and Pakistan. I grew up with them: like many Punjabis of my generation, I am from a family of Partition refugees. Memories of Partition, the horror and brutality of the time, the harking back to an — often mythical — past where Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs lived together in relative peace and harmony, have formed the staple of stories I have lived with.
(4)

Mere generalising the event as an unfortunate mark on the face of history doesn't lessen the trauma it outgrew. This particular juncture of history and memory, trauma and yearning- is aptly redeemed in the compositions of these luminaries.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, one of the celebrated Urdu poets, etched his verses into the cultural memory with works like "Subh-e-Azadi," where the celebration of freedom is juxtaposed against the shadows of an uncertain future. The poem stands as a testament to the complex emotions that pervaded the dawn of independence. The dawn was not only symbolic of a fresh start but also of the creation of a generation that reeked of the immeasurable depths of agonies for which no compensation was a cure. The poem interrogates the nature of the 'morning of independence' which people dreamt of, and attempts to demystify the unseen violence that shredded the lives of millions. Instead of feeling rejuvenated in the fresh air of the morning of independence, the poet records the echoes of outcries that the night enshrined. Loss and displacement form the very nucleus of partition poetry. The forced migration of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs across newly drawn borders resulted in the wringing apart of families and communities. A sense of profound loss, anguishes of communities and individuals on being displaced were some of the common as well as prominent themes along which the poems were woven as laments pining for the casualties. Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Amrita Pritam vividly captured the anguish of leaving ancestral homes, the pain of separation from loved ones, and the struggle to build a new life amidst the ruins of the past.

"Bol, ke lab āzād haiñ tere

Bol, zabān ab tak terī hai"

(Speak, for your lips are yet free / Speak, for your tongue is still your own)

(*Nuskha Haya Wafa*, 81)

Faiz's verses show a deep understanding of the emotional turmoil that an individual engulfed in a dark historical trench like the partition of 1947 experiences. He captures the emotional intensity proficiently and offers a socio-political commentary through his verses. During the

tempestuous times of partition, his poetry surfaced as a voice for the deprived and desolate. His verses proved a powerful means to verbalize the collective grief of a nation undergoing a painful transformation. While it celebrates the dawn of freedom on one hand, it bears the sense of sorrow and installs itself as a harbinger, foreshadowing the complexities and challenges that future withholds.

"Yeh dagh dagh ujala, yeh shab-gazida sahar,
Yeh wo sahar to nahiñ jiski arzoo lekar
Chale the yaar ke mil jayegi kahin na kahin
Falak ke dasht mein taareekh ki aakhiri shab
Koi to sahir tha jo bina-e-aasaar hua".

(*Nuskha Haye Wafa*, 116)

Though not explicitly about partition, the poem-‘Mujhse Pehli si Mohabbat’ by Faiz deals with the themes of loss and the very transitory nature of love, which can be further analysed in the context of the disorder and chaos caused by the partition. Faiz's poetry written mostly during the partition era lingers in the alley of the historical discord a bitter yet timeless expression of the collective human experience in the face of upheaval and loss. His verses continue to be loved by readers as they scrape the unhealed wounds of partition, thus, inflicting the suppressed pain. It offers a serious insight into the delicate but ruptured emotional landscape of a nation grappling with the consequences of imposed division.

Amrita Pritam is another stalwart who proved her mettle at deciphering human subjectivity through her verses written in Punjabi. She tackles various social issues through her social-activist lens that assesses numerous stigmas that society suffers with. Beside the issue of discrimination on the grounds of caste, economic status, the situation of the minorities in the social order forms the central ground of her poems.

In "Ajj aakhaan Waris Shah nu," the poet invokes the spirit of the legendary Punjabi Sufi poet Waris Shah to rise up and answer from his grave. She asks him to arise and be an accomplice in witnessing the devastated state of human affairs. She pleads before him to speak out boldly against the brutality of the times and seep some sense into the foolish minds of the perpetrators. The poem deliberates the anguish of a woman who has been a victim to the horrors of partition and attempts to seek solace in the words of a revered poet.

Awake, decry your Punjab,
O sufferer with those suffering!
Corpses entomb the fields today
the Chenab is flowing with blood.
Mingled with poison by some
are the waters of five rivers,
and this torrent of pollution,
unceasingly covers our earth.

(Translated by Amrita Pritam from Punjabi, 1)

The poem is one of its kind for it articulates the scuffled voices of women who endured losses both mental and physical in the aftermath of the tumultuous event of partition. The women beg Waris Shah to be their mouthpiece, to save them and their sacrifices from

slipping into the unknown realms of antiquity. Pritam supplicates the Sufi saint to save such voices of a large number of women who are raped, brutally killed, and dislocated from their homelands and loved ones in the process of getting across the border.

“Do Boondein Pani” is another composition by Amrita Pritam where she raises the issue of water scarcity during the tragic event of partition. The cost people paid for securing an independent nation, freedom from being governed by the British Raj, torn them inside out and wreaked hell upon their lives. Simpler resources of basic necessity were hard to procure and the Pritam through this poem highlights the ignorant policies deployed by the political decision makers and shatters the myth of ‘freedom’ as one being fare and peaceful for all. Water, here, is used as a metaphor, for quenching the thirst for a sustainable and peaceful life that was contrary to what reality had to offer.

Amrita Pritam’s partition poetry is embellished with elements of disarray, a temperament that yearns incessantly for an unsnarled reality and essentially a warmth to embrace the abrasions inflicted upon the souls of millions by the gruesome horrors of the tragic event- ‘the great divide’. Her verses envelopes with warmth the agonies of the underrepresented, the marginals by evoking their pains with sketches of vivid imagery and emotional depth.

Gulzar (Sampooran Singh Kalra), a renowned Indian poet, lyricist, and filmmaker, has also used poetry as a medium to explore the theme of partition. He introduces a unique blend of sensitivity and artistry that makes his composition modern in its oeuvre. He deploys his verses skilfully to capture the pain, nostalgia, and wearied human emotions traumatised with the appalling event of 1947. In his poem- “Dastaan-e-Gulzar”, Gulzar sheds light on the latent layers of untold stories that resulted from the rampant violation of human rights during the time of partition. The title, "Dastaan-e-Gulzar Hai Hazaar," translates loosely to “Gulzar has thousand tales to tell”. These tales basically form the crux of his poems where the hidden emotions and feelings find a space in the interstices of words of the poem. The poem delves into the countless narratives of pain and separation, encapsulating the collective anguish of a nation divided. Shaped by the events of 1947, the identities left culturally and emotionally distorted are explored in his poems so that a sense of their current status of being could be derived. Gulzar, who himself was affected deeply by the tragic event confesses in the very beginning of his collection *Footprints on Zero Line*,

I have witnessed the Partition. I have experienced the Partition. Standing on Zero Line I am still watching the trail of Partition. Seventy years have passed. Time has not been able to blow off the footprints. I don’t know how long it will take for them to sink into history and be the past. (“Author’s Note”)

In his poem ‘Zero Line’, Gulzar reminisces through the dreamy eyes of a dislocated soul who desires to be united with the essence of his home, the aroma of his soil but to his distress it turns out to be a dream deferred. The rift created by the event of partition, thus, hollows out the most essential component of a human being, the sense of belongingness which is made very much evident in the last stanza of the composition,

I am back at the Zero Line
My shadow whispers from behind me,

‘When you give up this body
Come back to your home
Your birthplace, your motherland.’

(Footprints on Zero Line, 2)

The entire collection consists of poems that alternates back and forth from nostalgia to reality, from the realm of memory to a realisation that the past can never be recuperated. Gulzar’s painful displacement from his homeland Dina which lies in present day Pakistan is reflected in every single poem in this very collection. ‘A Knock’ is constituted with a heart-rending undertone where the poet reconciles with his old, familiar mates in his dream who came to visit him from across the border. Retrieving the essence of the ‘other side’ remains a longing dream for the poet and to many who endured the thrashes of the catastrophe. Gulzar makes a comparison between the assassination across the border in the very night to the act of slaughtering the dream to be reunited with the beautiful past, he writes:

Last night there was shelling at the border, I hear

Last night, some dreams were killed at the border!

(Footprints on Zero Line, 20)

The division of the two nations for “better or worse” was a deciding factor for millions of lives who perished in this turmoil. The poets grapple with questions of identity and belonging in a world suddenly divided along religious lines. The works of Kaifi Azmi and Krishna Sobti explored the internal conflicts of individuals caught between conflicting loyalties and the struggle to find a sense of belonging in a fractured reality. The loss of an intact sense of belongingness, the fragmented hearts yearning for the lost roots and the emotionally distraught identities are all some of the common subjects of these poems. Nevertheless, a women-centric ethos also featured in the works of Amrita Pritam who sheds light on the uprootedness suffered by women during the time and experience the scars of the battle on their bodies and souls. Partition poetry also gives voice to the experiences of women, who often bore the brunt of the violence and displacement. Amrita Pritam's poignant verses, such as those in her collection "Pinjar," shed light on the resilience of women and the silent suffering they endured during those tumultuous times. Despite the overwhelming darkness, many partition poets infused their works with a sense of resilience and hope. They envisioned a future where the scars of partition would heal, and the shared cultural heritage of the subcontinent would prevail. The poetry of Gulzar and Javed Akhtar often reflects this optimism amidst the prevailing despair.

Partition poetry also played a crucial role in raising social awareness about the human cost of political decisions. Poets became advocates for communal harmony and the need for reconciliation. The powerful words of these poets resonated with people, transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries. Piyush Mishra, in his lyrical composition “Husna” establishes the stark reality of the boundaries being a mere political divide. The two lovers separated by the dreadful event are yet united by the weather, culture and ethos which is common between the two nations. Thus, the poets acted as cultural custodians, preserving the shared history and cultural richness of the subcontinent. Through their verses, they kept alive

the memories of pre-partition unity and sought to bridge the gaps that emerged with the political division. It became a means of healing and catharsis. Both survivors and later generations found solace in the poetic expressions of shared pain, providing a collective outlet for grief and a medium for understanding the trauma that permeated the subcontinent.

The impact of partition poetry is enduring, shaping the literary landscape of the Indian subcontinent. These works continue to be studied, celebrated, and recited, ensuring that the lessons of partition are not forgotten and that the voices of those who lived through it are immortalized. While the partition of India happened over seven decades ago, the echoes of that seismic event still reverberate in contemporary times. Recent poets continue to engage with the themes of partition, offering new perspectives and interpretations. The works of Keki N. Daruwalla and Kamala Das, among others, explore the enduring impact of partition on subsequent generations and the ongoing quest for identity.

Partition poetry stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit of the people who lived through the tumultuous events of 1947. It serves as a literary bridge that connects the past to the present, fostering a collective understanding of the shared history of the Indian subcontinent. Through the evocative verses of poets, the pain, loss, and resilience of those affected by partition are etched into the cultural memory, ensuring that the lessons of the past are not forgotten. As the subcontinent continues to grapple with the complexities of its history, partition poetry remains a poignant and powerful reminder of the human cost of political decisions and the unwavering capacity of the human spirit to endure and rebuild.

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