

## **THE HETEROGENEOUS REALM OF SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE IN DETERMINING THE PUBLIC SPHERE OF PARTITION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research aims to explore the heterogeneous realm of South Asian Literature in determining the public sphere of Partition of India and its integrational repercussions on the South Asian space. In this context, the study would focus on Indian and Pakistani writers Bapsi Sidhwa and Khushwant Singh in particular. Historiographic metafiction is studied as a determinant of public sphere and private sphere bearing a consequential approach to the region. The objective of this research is to explore South Asian literature pertaining to the event of partition and expound upon its role on the varied yet interconnected realm of South Asia. There is a gap in the studies with reference to South Asian Literature and its application on public sphere.

**KEYWORDS:** South Asian Literature in Determining

### **INTRODUCTION**

Douglas Kellner explains the structure of Habermas's laws to understand public and private sphere. He writes, Habermas's concept of the public sphere thus described a space of institutions and practices between the private interests of everyday life in civil society and the realm of state power. The public sphere thus mediates between the domains of the family and the workplace -- where private interests prevail -- and the state which often exerts arbitrary forms of power and domination. What Habermas called the "bourgeois public sphere" consisted of social spaces where individuals gathered to discuss their common public affairs and to organize against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public power. (Kellner 2)

Though public sphere is meant to generate discussion and debate, the official narrative discourse and historian point of view narrows down the perspective to the historian's vantage point. Thus, a study of the private sphere becomes a source of diversity in perspectives. In the context of partition and the narratives that generated from the event and its aftermath, the cause and effect of the event are seen dependent on the differences created in public and private sphere. According to Christiane Hartnack in "Roots and Routes: The Partition of British Indian Social Memories", "Between half and half a million South Asian men, women and children lost their lives as a result of the partition of British India in 1947, over 70,000 women were raped and about 12 million people fled their homes", these men and women share and contribute to social memories. Since, these memories are of different individuals sharing the same event these are called memories rather than a singular memory. Hartnack claims, "Like other social memories, Indian social memories in regard to the Partition of British India are constructed to serve political, social or psychological functions. In the public sphere, they might be evoked to legitimize or delegitimize the dominant power structure, or to distinguish one collective identity construct from another" (Hartnack 1). The official historical discourse provides an account of the social memories; however, historiographic metafiction enters both the public sphere as well as the private sphere. Thus, there is a heterogeneous characteristic in the historiographic metafiction on and about partition. The Realm of this literature ventures

into “porous boundaries” (Bhabha) of the regions split by the act of partition as well as the boundaries between history and fiction. The public sphere which historians and officials depict is a compilation of the social memories of the South Asian men and women with “common roots” but “different national aspirations” (Hartnack 1). Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *The IceCandyman*, Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* and Anita Desai’s *A Clear Light of Day* depict characters and their lives in such a manner as to show that “the majority of British India’s population did not strive for or initiate the Partition. Most were even oblivious to it”, hence, they were living in their private spheres. However, the course of the events took such a turn as to involve the unwilling individuals into the public sphere, at the parks, at offices or even at gurudwaras and mosques. The Ice-candy-man in *The IceCandyman* is one such example, he is an entertainer and an artist he can adopt roles, Hindu, Muslim or of any caste and creed. The political climate however, sways him to adopt the biased mob mentality. He enters the public sphere at the park with vengeance and revenge, proclaiming his ideas with respect to differences of cast, creed and religion. The Parsi characters on the other hand, remain in their private spheres due to alienation to the religious issues. Though, Lenny’s mother feels an affiliation to her fellow citizens and endeavors to help by fueling their vehicles for transportation. In the same context, in *Train to Pakistan*, the villagers of Mano Majra are oblivious to the killings and massacres outside their village and reside in harmony with their fellow villagers until the mob from the other village and the trainload of dead bodies enters their private sphere.

The novels show the repercussions of this encroachment. In *Ice-Candy Man*, Bapsi Sidhwa narrates the events of the partition of the subcontinent, the ensuing riots and massacres. She uses a child narrator to depict the violence perpetuated by Muslims, Sikhs and Hindu communities. The religious impartiality of a Parsee child narrator to the violent groups, comprising adults, facilitates a panoramic as well as an ironic view of the event of partition. It shows the heterogeneity in perspective of the characters. As Hartnack writes, “the partition of British India was externally imposed and internally sanctioned” (Hartnack 2), the narratives expressing the event are different in nature describing the external sphere of the event and the internal sphere. The external elements are discussed by historians like Jaswant Singh, Stanley Wolpert and Chatta. However, fiction writers portray the internal elements. They show the private realm of the internally and externally displaced individuals of a country hosting heterogeneity for centuries. Division and schism were alien to this heterogeneity. However, heterogeneity in heteroglot novels depicts “diversity of languages”. No one language or perspective overrides the other. According to Mikhail M. Bakhtin quoted by Andrew Robinson in “In Theory Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia”, Heteroglossia in a discourse is diversity of style and voices. Even in a single perspective there are multiple voices and perspectives. In *Train to Pakistan*, the character Iqbal, has a name which is common to all religious groups thus, he stands for all three religions as well as an atheistic stance. It is a story about a village, Mano Majra, where Muslims are tenants to Sikh lords and there is an influential Hindu a family. The officials are Hindu too. There is harmony in village till outsiders come in and instill animosity for neighbors and friends.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s characters show the same diversity. However, they are connected by a seemingly neutral voice. It is the voice of a non-Muslim, non-Hindu or Non-Sikh, a Parsee child. The Parsee child narrator, Lenny, connects all the characters of the novel. The characters in Sidhwa’s novel belong to different religious groups. In *The IceCandyman*, a Parsi family has an Ayah-a maid for their polio-stricken daughter. The maid takes the daughter to the park, where individuals belonging to different religions and walks of life sit together in harmony. However, ensuing riots in the city breed hatred for each other. It is through Lenny that the characters meet and communicate. This communication among the characters highlights the shared experiences of the multiple communities inside India at the time of partition. She shows the varied effects of partition on different characters of different faiths. Lenny’s life revolves around the Ayah, her maidservant, and

the multi-religious group centers around the activities of Ayah as well. The Ayah attracts men regardless of their age, ethnicity or religion. Lenny narrates, “Stub-handed twisted beggars and dusty old beggars on crutches drop their poses and stare at her hard, alert eyes. Holy men, masked in piety, shove aside their pretences to ogle her with lust”. Men from all walk of life, “cart-drivers, cooks, coolies and cyclists” (Sidhwa 3) gape at her. The closest “circle of admirers” (Sidhwa 88) of Ayah includes the Muslim Ice-Candyman, the Sikh Sher Singh, and the Hindu Masseur. Ayah becomes their unifying force. Her character becomes a dialogic site on which Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs interact. The English gaze at her voluptuous “chocolate-brown”(3) body too. The character of Ayah is a metaphorical representation of India, which is symbolically and literally desired, seduced and raped. It is just like the character of Ayah, that India is a dialogic site, where Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsees and Christians co-exist. For the British, “by the late nineteenth century India had become the greatest, most durable, and most profitable of all British, perhaps even European, colonial possessions” (Said 160). In Sidhwa’s works, India is depicted by a child seeing India through her Ayah, a “goddess” loved and yearned for by all, English Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Parsee and Sikh. At the park, where they meet for discussions, the group around Ayah remains loyal to each other while all other groups remain scattered. Lenny reflects how “the group around Ayah remains unchanged. Hindus, Muslims, Sikh, Parsee are, always unified around her” (Sidhwa 97).

It is this unification that engenders a sense of wholeness among Sidhwa’s characters. The group forms a “whole entity” (Bakhtin DI), which is eventually severed by the act of partition of India. The possibilities of dialogue are inherent in the unification of the group and its affiliation with each other. However, the brutal death of Masseur, and the abduction of Ayah by the Ice-Candyman terminate the dialogue between the groups temporarily while the country is being sliced too. Lenny envisions the act of partition as “a torn Punjab”, she questions, “Will the earth bleed? And what about the Sundered rivers? Won’t their water drain into the jagged cracks? Not satisfied by breaking India, they now want to tear the Punjab” (Sidhwa 116), upon seeing a crowd holding “knives, choppers, daggers, axes, staves and scythes”, Lenny wonders whether they have “A lot of meat to cut” (Sidhwa 150). These visions of dismemberment, of slicing resonate in Lenny’s head as nightmares. Even as a child the thought of slicing a piece of land is to make it bleed. This “religious arsenal” (150), which the crowd carries is prophetic of “Cracking India”. Each “breast they cut off” (156) signifies the bleeding earth. Thus, the “whole entity” is threatened by the “religious arsenal”. The group which indulges in dialogue suddenly opts for non-dialogic tools, like knives, choppers and scythes. Nevertheless, the novel depicts the “dialogic negotiation of power” (Pechey 24). The significance of dialogue is embedded in the “ideology of the text” (Pechey 25), when Lenny realizes that in forgetting a past “none of us control” that one can keep “whole”(Sidhwa 211). The yearning for wholeness is prevalent throughout the text. Lenny’s physical anatomy of a polio-ridden child depicts her incompleteness in her private sphere, however, she negotiates with her physical condition through her social “wholeness” of belonging to a united group, where “Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims form a thick circle round us”(Sidhwa 99).

Contextually looking at the public sphere, Jaswant Singh, in *Jinnah: India-Partition Independence* describes the “surgical operation” (305) of dividing a United India like splitting a family home into pieces. According to Gandhi the “division” could be one like “between two brothers” (321). He claimed, “Children of the same family, dissatisfied with one another by reason of change of religion, if they wished, could separate, but then the separation would be within themselves and not separation in the face of the whole world”. According to him, “when two brothers separate, they do not become enemies...in the eyes of the world. The world would still recognize them as brothers” (321). Therefore, the dialogue between the two brothers would remain intact. According to Michael Holquist’s interpretation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s Dialogism, “In dialogism, the very capacity to have consciousness is based on *otherness*. This otherness is not merely a

dialectical alienation on its way to a sublation that will endow it with a unifying identity in higher consciousness. On the contrary: in dialogism consciousness *is* otherness” (Holquist *Dialogism*18). The terms self and other are “relative” rather than “absolute” (18), as is private and public sphere. Holquist writes, “It cannot be stressed enough that for him[Bakhtin] ‘self’ is dialogic so a relation. And because it is so fundamental a relation, dialogue can help us understand how other relationships work”. The private sphere thus, has the capacity to commune. He further explains how these relationships are “binary oppositions, but assymetrical dualisms”. For Bakhtin, thus, the “key to understanding all such artificially isolated dualisms is the dialogue between self and other”, making self/other a “relation of simultaneity”, and “simultaneity deals with ratios of same and different in space/time, which is why Bakhtin was always concerned with space/time”(19).

Hence, relationship between different concepts, beliefs and people signify simultaneity. In *Train to Pakistan*, Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus share simultaneity in the public sphere of the mosque, the gurudwara, and at the Hindu landlord’s house. However, in the private sphere, their religious distinctness is intact. The mob tries to water this distinctness to create contestation and a dialectical response among the Mano Majra clan. Where dialects focus on sublation, “dialogues know no sublation”. Bakhtin “insists on differences that cannot be overcome: separateness and simultaneity are basic conditions of existence”, making dialogism “a version of relativity” (20). Therefore, “Dialogism argues that all meaning is relative ...it comes about only as a result of the relation between two bodies occupying *simultaneous but different* space”. Further explaining that “bodies may be... ranging from the immediacy of our physical bodies”, as is apparent in the physical relationship between the Masseur and the Ayah as well as the Ice-Candyman and Ayah “to political bodies” as Congress and Muslim League and “to bodies of ideologies” (20-21) in this case, the ideology behind creating a new Islamic state for Muslims and the ideology of living as united Indians. For Bakhtin, “reality is always experienced, not conceived, and further it is always experienced from a particular position”. This position is integral for dialogism, and Bakhtin ‘conceives the position in kinetic terms as a situation, an event, the event of being a self’ (21). In Sidhwa’s novel, the event of partition is conceived as a proclamation of self of the physical body, political body and body of ideology. Consequently, splitting of these bodies, whether these are physical, political or ideological proves to be dialectical in nature.

In the official discourse, for instance Jaswant Singh’s *Jinnah: India –Partition-Independence*, Stanley Walport’s *India Pakistan: Continued Conflict or Cooperation*, Chattha’s *Partition and Locality*, the partition is seen as a monologic event, whereas, the novel carries within the genre the concept of dialogic answerability. However, ‘monologism’ is not so much an opposition, as a complement to dialogism. Actually,... ‘monologism’ is but the structure of a particular event...that is ‘waiting’ to be *understood dialogically*” (Brandist & Tihhanov 25). Hence, these non-fiction texts help understand novels. Despite Jaswant Singh’s claims in that “I do not write as a cold, linear narrator of events alone” (Singh xv), he writes as a Sikh and a “political figure from India” to “fill the gap” in historiographies written on Jinnah. Singh’s perspective is cold as it is with contempt that he records the “vivisection”(xv) of his India, it is linear as it is solely political. In the same manner, Walport provides an eagle eye view of partition from a non-participant of the event. He never experienced the event. He was not part of the space or time of partition. His view is credible for its impartiality to a religious or political group; however, it remains distant and parallel never coinciding with subjective views of those who experience the event. Bapsi Sidhwa’s personal involvement with the event of partition is impacted in the story as well as the character of Lenny. Lenny provides a subjacent view of the event.

It is novels, therefore, which help access the plurality of ontological and cosmological truths with the element of

answerability embedded within the language and content of the novel. In a novel, “there is an intimate connection between the project of language and the project of selfhood: they both exist in order to mean”, which is a “drive to meaning” of self. The “self for Bakhtin is a cognitive necessity” (Holquist *Dialogism*22-23). In the case of fiction, there is a demand for answer inherent in the word, utterance and narrative as all words are uttered in anticipation of an answer. The dialogic potential in the novels, therefore, offers multiple answers to questions regarding division, cause of division and consequences of division of the subcontinent in to two different countries. Geographically and politically, the partition led to disconnection of one unit-the pre-partition India, which is also seen as a psychological division of self from other. Bakhtin declares, “ The novel is the characteristic text of a particular stage in the history of consciousness not because it marks the self’s discovery of itself, but because it manifests the self’s discovery of the other”(Holoquist 75).

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