

Rupantaran: A Multidisciplinary Journal
Vol. IX: PP 68-74, January, 2025
ISSN(Print) : 2091-0061, ISSN (Electronic): 2738-9960
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/rupantaran.v9i01.73482>
Research Management Cell (RMC)
Dhankuta Multiple Campus, Dhankuta
Tribhuvan University, Nepal

Review Article

The Partition's Shadow: Unpacking Trauma in *Cracking India*

Krishna Prasad Bhattarai¹
Tilak Bhusal, PhD²
Email: tilakbhusaltu@gmail.com

Abstract

The main objective of this research paper is to explore partition trauma in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*. By portraying a disabled child, Lenny, as a witness, Sidhwa seems to take the Pakistani Muslim's side. The treatment of partition trauma in this novel is biased. This novel unethically portrays the Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh relationship, so it is culturally guided. Rather than normalizing the Hindu –Muslim wound, Sidhwa presents this relationship from the Pakistani perspective, which reminds the partition trauma and leads to post-traumatic stress disorder. This issue is framed within the theoretical parameter of trauma theory, taking the ideas of Avishai Margalit, Caruth, and Pandey.

Keywords: Partition, trauma, witness, post-traumatic stress.

Introduction

Pakistani writer Bapsi Sidhwa, in her renowned novel *Cracking India*, superbly portrays the story of the atrocities that took place in the time of partition between India and Pakistan. The story is in a first-person narrative form. The narrator is a nine-year-old Parsee girl named Lenny, but as the story progresses, we realize that the narration is, in fact, the writer's thoughts. She is presenting her thoughts from a Pakistani perspective.

This paper argues that her novel presents the precarious events during the partition. In a way, she is redeeming her trauma via her narration. Through this novel, she is, in a sense, purging her by denigrating the image of Hindus and Sikhs, whereas she is uplifting the image of Muslims by projecting the latter in a much higher position. We can see in the novel when the writer inherently portrays the position of Jinnah as superior to Gandhi and Nehru.

¹ Mr. Bhattarai is a Teaching Assistant of English at Tribhuvan University, Butwal Multiple Campus, Butwal, Nepal.

² Dr. Bhusal is a Lecturer of English at Tribhuvan University, Butwal Multiple Campus, Butwal, Nepal.

Main Text

Trauma and Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder

Trauma is a shock to the body or mind due to violence or accident producing a lasting harmful effect (physical and psychological). A medico-legal term before 1990s, it has become very significant in fields like psychology, sociology, history, political science, ethics, literature, and aesthetics and has become a basis for trauma theory. Cathy Caruth (2006) says:

Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrences of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. (p. 181)

Trauma, in a sense, is an experience of a sudden incident of an event that takes place in the present time and haunts in the later phase of life if such an incident reoccurs and the pain of such incident is carried by the sufferer in his/her mind the trauma recurs and becomes painful. In such conditions, the sufferer can become numb, hallucinate, and suffer mental agony. It is an overwhelming experience of violence that shocks us. It can have very damaging effects on an individual, community, or society. It is often delayed and uncontrolled that a traumatic person cannot have control over it. By its nature, it is mighty because it can cause lasting damage to the psychological development of a person, and it can occur at any time or moment to a traumatic person, a person who has already had an experience of violence.

The study of "post-traumatic stress disorder," which characterizes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events and the often delayed and uncontrollable occurrence of hallucinations, flashbacks, and other intrusive phenomena as a response to the event, is the culmination of this trend. According to current understanding, traumatic illnesses are a direct result of the mind being forced to deal with the unavoidable reality of awful events; they are the result of an uncontrollable event taking over the mind's mental and neurological functions. It is, therefore, believed to be the most damaging and genuine psychic experience. Literary and cultural theorists are very interested in trauma theory.

Misrepresentation of Partition Trauma

Though a child narrates the novel, the writer presents her view via the child, which looks pretty subjective and biased. We can see the hidden agony of the post-partition trauma of the writer when she narrates the story through Lenny. Sidhwa presents the novel from the Pakistani perspective. However, we could find violence in the novel, which is caused by the Muslims too, that has been presented as a euphemism and in an average standard. We can see in the novel when she makes fun of the Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi:

Gandhijee, too, is off his feed, we hear. There is a slaughter of Muslims in Bihar- he does not want it to spread to Bengal. It does not. Inspired by Gandhijee, we launch a more determined fast. We turn sallow, hollow-eyed, pot-bellied. (p. 112)

In this line, the author mocks Gandhi and de-glorifies his image around the world. This degradation of the image of Gandhi shows the inherent cultural trauma and biases in her writing for the Indian majority. She seems to mock the whole Indian base with such writing.

Sidhwa presents the negative image of the Hindus by denigrating them as a mere initiator of the violence before the partition. The degradation is evident in the interaction between the two characters, Dost Mohammed and Jagjeet Singh, in the novel:

They talk of a plan to drive the Muslims out of East Punjab. To divide the Punjab. They say they will not Live with the Mussulmans if there is to be a Pakistan. Owlsh talk like that! You know city talk. It's madness. It can't amount to anything. But they've always been like that. Troublemakers. You'll have to look out till this evil blows over. (p. 116)

In the above paragraph, Sidhwa presents the negative image of the Sikhs; these statements vividly show the reluctance of the Hindus to live with the Muslims in the country before partition. However, by showing the interaction between these peoples, she projects her one-sided, biased view regarding the Hindu people; it was not one-way traffic. Instead, the Muslims were also active participants in this violence and hatred. During this internal conflict before partition, Muslims, too, were reluctant to live communally with the Hindu community.

Sidhwa, through the first-person narration of a child, presents the denigrating image of the Hindus and Sikhs, omitting the violence conducted by the Muslims and presenting a clean image only as a retractor against the Hindu violence.

Sidhwa intentionally tries to sow the seeds of hatred against the Hindus in the reader's mind and presents the Hindu as a prime suspect for initiating the violence: "A few days later, in Lahore, we hear of attacks on Muslim villages near Amritsar and Jalandhar. But the accounts are contrary and the details so brutal and bizarre that they cannot be believed" (p. 117). Here, the writer presents her myopic view regarding the violence, which was caused by the Hindus only. She tries to present the trauma of homelessness, the trauma and pain of leaving one locality and country when she presents the interaction after the partition boundaries are drawn:

Do you expect us to leave everything we've valued and loved since childhood? The seasons, the angle and color of the sun rising and setting over our fields are beautiful to us, and the shape of our rooms and barns is familiar and dear. You can't expect us to leave just like that! (p. 119)

The trauma in this passage is very humongous; the sufferer knows such kind of trauma better. The trauma of homelessness and sudden change from one nationality to another is traumatic, which has a traumatic effect on the sufferer. In her interview, the writer says she is presenting the ongoing partition situation. However, her view instead posits the reader with a negative image of the Hindus and Muslims as the prime victims of this partition period.

In "*The Ethics of Memory*," Avishai Margalit (2005) argues that it is our ethical responsibility or obligation to remember the trauma of the traumatic past. If we remember, we veer toward forgiveness, healing, and forgetting. She shows the distinction between

morality and ethics. For her, "Morality is long on geography and short on memory, ethics is typically short on geography and long on memory" (p. 8). Morality is universal so it is long on geography, it sees through the perspective of humanity but for community or nation. Her distinction between morality and ethics is based on the distinction between the two types of relations, near and dear. Thin relations are, in general, our relations. She says, "Thick relations are in general our relations to the near and dear ones whereas thin relations are in general our relations to the stranger and the remote" (p. 7). It clarifies that thick relations are associated with ethics and thin with morality.

Regarding trauma, morality of memory is better than ethics of memory. If the focus is given on morality in traumatic testimony, then the event condemns itself, which may lead to the healing of the trauma, forgiveness, and even forgetting. However, the focus is on the ethics of memory. In that case, the reader or audience starts to condemn the victimizer or perpetrator, which may lead to more hatred for the perpetrator and even the state of revenge.

If ethics is played more, then the audience sees justice not in contemplating traumatic events but in revenge, which even leads to crime, and it becomes a crime against humanity. This kind of feeling to the audience does not lead to the healing of the trauma, or it does not work if I borrow the words from Lacapra about the therapeutic aspects of trauma. Margalit places morality in a high position or focuses on morality rather than ethics. It becomes vivid when she says, "Being moral is a required good" (p. 105). Pragmatically, this idea teaches that any piece of literature about trauma should appeal to morality rather than to ethics. The theme of ethics can be mainly seen in this novel. The way the writer presents her perspective regarding the partition seems to be that she is writing from the Pakistani perspective, so her writing should be categorized as ethical, near to the Pakistani view, and far from the Indian consent. If she had written from a neutral venue, then her writing would have been categorized from the criteria of morality, so instead of the incident condemning the violence itself, the readers develop revenge in their mind against the Indian majority, who are portrayed as hostile and responsible for the atrocities towards the Muslim.

Ethical trauma is not the only problem in traumatic literary texts. The presence of 'Cultural Trauma' is another weakness in the literature on violence. Cultural trauma presupposes a tear in the social fabric and should be stitched. It means cultural trauma tries to stitch that tear or hole, and in an attempt to do this, it tries to cure trauma totally, which would not be justifiable. We could find the same substance in *Cracking India*. The writer tries to stitch the trauma by presenting her inherent hatred towards the Indians by misrepresenting them and making them the perpetrators. However, we could assume that the perpetration act was not one-sided. Instead, it was two-way traffic. Both nations suffered the atrocities in the same ratio. As Beerendra Pandey (2009) says:

An exploration of the language of trauma in Indian English partition fiction reveals the presence of cultural trauma in fictional representation. This presence functions as a memory to settle old scores rather than a way to escape from the cycle of communal violence. (p. 126)

This statement examines the role of *cultural trauma* in Indian English partition fiction, suggesting that the language used to depict traumatic events like the partition goes

beyond mere recounting of events. Instead, it delves into the collective memory and unresolved grievances of the communities involved, which are expressed through fictional narratives.

The novels primarily written by the countries after the partition seem biased; few writers only wrote in neutral venues. The novel tries to implant a view that the Hindus were the prime suspects in the partition incident. Muslims were relatively passive in this partition incident. They were instead the victims. As we can see in the lines from the novel where two Muslims are seen interacting with each other, "Haven't the Hindus connived with the Angrez to ignore the Muslim League, and support a party that did not win a single seat in the Punjab? It is just the kind of thing we fear. They manipulate one or two Muslims against the interests of the larger community." (p. 100)

Inherently, the writer accuses the Hindus of ignoring the Muslims, taking the lion's share for their interest, and allowing the Muslims only a chunk. She presents the Sikhs as barbaric and monstrous beings. Instead of balancing the act of violence, she forces the reader to read the Sikhs attributed with animal morals. As we can see from the conversation where a Sikh says, "Once the line of division is drawn in Punjab, all Muslims to the east of it will have their balls cut off!" (139) Such a line only nurtures feelings of hatred among the readers, whether they are from any religion. The writer fails to give a proper account of the violence and projects her internal hatred regarding the partition and her trauma toward the Hindu majority.

The novel talks about the gruesome view of the atrocities conducted by the Hindu when a train from Amritsar comes to Lahore with a gunny sack full of human breasts of Muslim women. This incident is the point of departure for the proliferation of hatred between the Muslims and the Hindus. Such kind of incident, when read by the readers, might nurture hatred towards the Hindus.

The novel further describes the violence perpetrated by the Hindus in the Lahore province. Muslims would rather not have any part in such a kind of riot than Lahore. As the novel displays:

The Hindus of Shalmi must have piled much dynamite in their houses and shops to drive the Muslims from Mochi Gate. The entire Shalmi, an area covering about four square miles, flashes in explosions. The men and women on our roof are slapping each other's hands, laughing, hugging one another. (p. 147)

It clarifies a sense of the Hindus as the violators of the rules and the prime cause of the violence and the atrocities. The above lines vividly capture a moment of communal violence, set in Shalmi and Mochi Gate, locations in Lahore, against the backdrop of the partition of India and Pakistan. The lines suggest the aftermath of the conflict between Hindus and Muslims, reflecting how communal tensions escalated to the point of extreme violence, symbolized by dynamite explosions and the destruction of entire areas.

In *Cracking India*, Lenny, the young protagonist, and her observations and close interactions with others affected by the traumatic events of Partition. She states, "Ice-candy-

man's anguish becomes almost palpable. His hands tremble, and a tear trickles down his cheek" (p. 101). This line is narrated by Lenny, describing the character Ice-candy-man, who is visibly affected by the trauma and violence around him. Lenny observes his emotional breakdown, reflecting on how deeply the events impact him.

Lenny again describes the atmosphere surrounding her. As the Partition unfolds, she senses the overwhelming fear and anxiety in her environment, signaling the collective trauma felt by those around her. She says, "The days are marked by ominous silences and the continuous, smothering sense of fear and dread" (p. 146). This line captures the heightened state of anxiety and hyper-vigilance that characters experience in the aftermath of violence, symptoms commonly associated with PTSD. Lenny grapples with the violence surrounding her. She opines, "I want to forget the screams. But they will not leave me. The wailing and moaning come back to haunt me in my sleep, to echo in the silent moments. I am frightened, and I don't know how to make it go away" (p. 183). In this expression, Lenny's inability to escape the haunting memories of what she has witnessed—a classic symptom of trauma—reveals her intense emotional distress. Her reference to the sounds of "screams," "wailing," and "moaning" shows the sensory details that invade her mind even in quiet moments, indicating intrusive memories shared in post-traumatic experiences.

Lenny further expresses her pain in the novel and narrates, "I cannot close my eyes without seeing those hands, those bloodstained hands grabbing and tearing at my clothes" (p. 201). Here, Lenny's struggle with intrusive, vivid memories indicates trauma, as her mind involuntarily replays a scene she has witnessed, a hallmark of post-traumatic stress. This narrative is a direct thought or feeling expressed by Lenny herself, capturing her flashbacks and intrusive memories from a traumatic event she witnessed. All the above narratives visualize how Lenny, as the narrator, bears witness to the trauma experienced by others while also processing her trauma, providing a poignant portrayal of post-traumatic stress in the face of Partition's violence.

Conclusion

Bapsi Sidhwa's "Cracking India" offers a poignant, antagonistic portrayal of partition trauma from a distinctly Pakistani perspective. By using a child narrator, Sidhwa weaves a narrative that seems to carry her personal and cultural biases, shaping a version of history that elevates the Pakistani Muslim narrative while marginalizing the Hindu and Sikh experiences. This biased portrayal underscores the deep-rooted partition trauma and its lingering effects, leading to post-traumatic stress that resonates with readers from communal backgrounds. The narrative's alignment with Avishai Margalit's concept of the ethics of memory accentuates the ethical dynamics within historical memory and further fuels cultural tension and narrative imbalances. Ultimately, Sidhwa's work highlights the complex interplay between memory, cultural trauma, and narrative bias, reminding us of literature's significant role in perpetuating and healing historical wounds. It underscores the necessity for a more balanced narrative to promote reconciliation rather than entrench existing divides.

References

- Berger, J. (1997). Trauma and literary theory. *Contemporary Literature*, 3, 569–582.
- Caruth, C. (2006). Confronting political trauma. *Connecticut Review*, 28(1), 17–28.
- ... Unclaimed experience: Trauma and the possibility of history. *Yale French Studies*, 79, 181–192.
- Margalit, A. (2009). *The ethics of memory*. Harvard University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674040595>
- Pandey, B. (2009). Pedagogy of Indian partition literature in the light of trauma theory. In S. Satpathy (Ed.), *Southern postcolonialisms: The global South and 'new' literary representations* (pp. 124–138). Routledge.
- Sidhwa, B. (1988). *Cracking India*. Milkweed Editions.