When Memories Become Traumatic: A Reading of Jamila Hashmi’s *Exile* and Joginder Paul’s *Dariyaon Pyas*

**Silpi Maitra**  
M.phil (English Literature)  
The English and Foreign Languages University  
Shillong.

The Partition of India and Pakistan is considered to be a singular moment in the history of South Asia and Britain. Partition had two fold purposes, one it granted independence to a supposedly Hindu India and secondly created a new nation called Pakistan which was predominantly populated by Muslims. The violence that it generated was not only unprecedented but even barbaric. The vengeance that ordinary Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs wrecked on each other distorted the political judgements. The real sorrow of the Partition was that it ended a long and communally shared history. The relationship between the three major communities of India worsened and which in return led to many heinous crimes. The moments of active malevolence and communal frenzy left an indelible mark on the minds of the people. These unforgettable moments were encapsulated in the form of Partition Literature.

Memories of Partition though are often hurtful are well represented in art forms. As it has been argued that art better than any language can voice the unresolved burdens of the past. Literature as a form of art generally goes beyond the strictures of official history. Jason Francisco in his review article ‘In The Heat Of Fratricide, The Literature of India’s Partition Burning Freshly’, says, “literature truly evokes the suffering of the innocent, whose pain is more universal and ultimately a vehicle of more honest reconciliation than political discourse”.

According the study of Partition, the word ‘trauma’ achieves major significance. It comes from the Greek word meaning ‘wound’, a separation of bodily tissues. However several dictionary entries define trauma as a disordered state resulting from an extremely distressing experience resulting in long-lasting psychological effects. This term however accounts for numerous medical and surgical metaphors. The Partition of India and Pakistan is not just history alone, it is memory too. A memory that continues to bring the past into the present that might stay locked within the patterns of consciousness below the everyday reality. Krishna Sobti defines Partition as something which is ‘difficult to forget but dangerous to remember’ (Quoted in Urvashi Butalia’s The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India, p. 269). These events left the people physically and psychologically traumatised.

Trauma is often defined as a wound or external bodily injury in general. However there is one cited example from Popular Science Monthly Magazine in 1895, which contradicts the above mentioned emphasis by referring to ‘psychical trauma’ as a morbid nervous condition. In Partition narratives thus remembrance becomes very important. As Urvashi Butalia defines the inextricable relationship between the past and the present: It is the present, our involvement in it, our wish to share it to lead to the kind of future we desire that leads to revisit and re-examine the past (p – 29).
Perhaps one of the most controversial and well known psychological effects of trauma is the repressed memory. Repressed memories are those memories which are not forgotten in the traditional sense but removed from the conscious mind and are present in the long term memory. Emotions also form a large part in trauma especially which results from near death experiences. The effect emotions have on memory in different instances become an integral part of the effect that trauma has on memory. Some of the emotional events are recalled more frequently especially traumatic events like sexual abuse are interrelated with strong negative emotions. It must be seen that emotions which have strong relation with memory also depends on how the victim has been traumatised by these incidents.

Memory becomes a complex phenomenon that often reaches far beyond what constitutes the historian’s archives. Memory is not only what mind can remember but also documents the things that we don’t want to remember. It can also be that phenomenon which we do not always consciously remember but suddenly we become aware of its existence. And the question that comes to the forefront when researchers are dealing with the Partition Literature is how forgetting can be an aid in dealing with pain and unpleasantness in life. Memory then becomes a far more complicated thing than it actually is. There are two aspects of memory that can be related with the Partition narratives, one is the sentiment of nostalgia and the other is the sense of trauma.

A traumatised memory has a certain narrative structure which is totally opposite to the historical narrative. A historical narrative directly leads up to the event, just explaining why it happened. The questions that remain submerged come to the surface when a researcher follows the narrative structure of traumatised memory. The Partition narratives where women play the role of protagonists are conceived within a sense of tragedy and trauma. The authors express a sense of stunned disbelief that anything like this can happen at all and how the peaceful neighbours can become ferocious after years of peaceful co-

existence. The people could not accept the fact that they could be cut adrift in this sudden and cruel manner from their familiar world.

Memory is described in psychology as the ability of the organism to store, retain and subsequently retrieve information. When an individual experiences a traumatic event, his or her memory can be affected in many ways. Although there is much debate in the whole concept of how memory works, scientists generally believe that there are four stages of memory including intake, storage, rehearsal and retrieval. Psychological trauma as defined by the American Psychiatric Association is ‘an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others’. Memory is a ‘tricky’ thing when it reminds one of the happy past and mocks at the sorrowful present. As the nameless protagonist of Jamila Hashmi’s Banished is reminded of her present confinement and her banishment from her happy past. She says:

Who has the time or inclination to listen to Sitaji’s lament in this country? The pain and loneliness is hard to bear. And life is so difficult (Memon – 92).

It is an unusual Partition story as it is narrated from the point of view of a woman who is also the protagonist. Unlike the mythical Sita, she is compelled to stay with Ravana, with no hope of Ram coming to her rescue. The story contains two strands: the past that is the narrator’s childhood in which she yearningly remembers her family, especially her brother who had left for England and secondly her sorrowful present. She ponders on her fate where she had become the unwed bahu of Gurpal, the mother of three children and a domestic servant to be beaten and cursed. Her pathetic state of existence, the absence of her brother,
and the death of her parents have shattered her world. The division between her public and private life is a significant aspect of her character.

She is aware and conscious of her status and identity and occasionally protests against its erasure. When asked by her abductor Gurpal:

Can’t you ever bring yourself to forget that incident? She quietly resists, ‘that was a different time. How can I make him understand that time never changes. Man suffers because man cannot forget. That time lives on my memory just as it was...(Memon 97).

Life is difficult for those who are in exile, the emotional trauma regarding the past and the present are sometimes unbearable. The reconcilement with the present becomes a heartrending sight. With the passage of time her status in her abductor’s home has undergone a massive change. Her bonds have grown stronger with Bari ma as she severed her last remaining links with the past. She becomes the prized daughter-in-law and her Lakshmi. However inwardly she still feels that ‘bahu’ is a term of abuse for her as she was abducted and kept without any legal, religious or social sanction. Her act of speaking out, recalling, remembering and recording the past is considered to be an act of resistance. The narrative being developed on two lines of memory constantly goes back to the blissful past and the other to the painful present. She is haunted by a feeling that she had been obliterated from her familial past. A sense of lamentation is captured in the role of the narrator who had been abducted and made a part of a Sikh family and is urged to forget her past. Memory is not a redeeming force over here but a constant reminder of the tortured past and the hardships of the present. This Sita unlike the mythical one had to accept ‘Ravana’s home’. The protagonist accepts Ravana’s home but at the same time seems to be suspended between her past and her present. She is in fact banished from her own selfhood.

People who have difficulties in living a ‘normal’ life after experiencing severe trauma are just one example of a kind of subject that deviates from the norm. Lawrence Langer in his book Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory (1991), comments upon the split subjectivity experienced by survivors of the death camps in giving oral accounts of their experiences. There is a rupture or discontinuity experienced between the ‘normal’ self and the ‘abnormal’ self which is traumatised. Their memories are fragmented and disconnected which threatens to overwhelm their normal self. This leads to a physical sense of disconnection in the present, the feeling of being dead in spite of living. Judith Herman chronicles similar experiences among rape survivors, battered women in her book *Trauma and Recovery*. Here she describes how women subjected to dehumanizing and often life-threatening betrayal of their bodily and psychic integrity experience ruptures in their self narratives.

Bodh Prakash in his essay ‘Nation and Identity in the Narratives of Partition’ claims that the defining moment of Partition forces the individual to realize ‘the pastness of the past’ and the presence of the ‘here’ and ‘now’ (P 76). He or she is simply deprived of his/her identity and suffers from uprootedness and homelessness. As a refugee he/she has to relocate his identity as the present identity is shaped, influenced and conditioned by the very past. In most of the social realistic fiction we find how the storm tossed souls of the individuals are represented. The individual stands uprooted and alienated in search of a new identity. While considering the narratives written by the writers like Joginder Paul and Intezar Husain it can be said that both of them focuses on the predicament of Partition refugees. The memory of the pre-partition and the inability to erase that painful memory leaves the protagonists traumatised.

The primacy of memory with its focus on the individual’s inner world is achieved by the use of symbols and metaphors. The theme of the individual and society acquires
complex dimensions in the context of the ‘mohajir’ experience. Being a ‘mohajir’ or a refugee was a complex and a difficult experience. It led to the inevitable problems of economic insecurity and shelter which further complicated their notion of cultural identities. Most refugees carried with them strong memories of their birth places. They constantly recall their ‘homes’ that they have left behind. ‘Home’ becomes a symbol of their multi-layered identity which is defined by language and customs.

The old lady Bebe of Joginder Paul’s story ‘Dariyaon Pyas’, carried her ancestral haveli in her mind across the borders. She clutched the haveli in the grip of her hands by carrying the keys. The keys become a symbol of an invaluable possession which she will never let go. Clinging to the keys of the haveli, she tries to make sense of her existence. She belongs to the past. However it must be noted that in the normative structure of the society, women are identified with their homes and have a sense of belonging. If she is forcibly displaced from such a format of existence, she is shorn of the basic marker of her existence. This results in an unnatural psychic death. The question that becomes very crucial is where does she belong? In a general sense it can be claimed that she belongs to the past but actually she resides neither in the past nor in the present. She fails to believe that she had travelled a long way from the past and as far as the present is concerned, she becomes a total misfit. Her identity as the protector of the haveli is entrenched in her consciousness which cannot be shaken away. The sense of nostalgia is predominant in this story. With the division of her heart, Bebe’s identity becomes fragmented all over again when she is made to realise the futility of her situation.

Bebe’s son Munna tries hard to drive home the point that it is futile for her to reside in her past as they have moved across the borders:

How can I convince you that we have left our haveli, village and country across the border. We’ve left them several years ago. But you still dwell there. Where else will I live now, Munna? You settle down anywhere you like, live and laugh but I have only my ancestral haveli (p-64).

Her life becomes an exercise of remembering and forgetting. She can’t help remembering the past which others try to forget. Conflict between the past and the present that arises eventually dismantle their lives. Bebe is the picture of a woman who is emotionally traumatised. Leaving her home in Pakistan, she had to migrate to India and is suffering from uprootedness, the whole concept of home becomes a nostalgia to her. Like the diasporic writers who are ever torn between the concepts of home and homelessness, people who were uprooted from their ‘desh’ suffered from the same psychological trauma. Their ‘desh’ remained trapped in their past, in their nostalgia and in their memory. As Milan Kundera has said: “Nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return...Nostalgia seems something like the pain of ignorance of not knowing” (Kundera, Ignorance).

Regarding the protagonist Bebe of Joginder Paul’s Dariyaon Pyas, it can be said that she suffers from post-traumatic-stress disorder. It is a response to some overwhelming events. It is a phenomenon which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviour which resulted from that particular event. Cary Caruth in her important collection of essays Trauma: Explorations in Memory discusses about the origin of the post – traumatic stress disorder. To be traumatised therefore means to be possessed by an event. A traumatic symptom cannot therefore be interpreted as only a distortion of reality. According to Caruth, the truth of traumatic experience is not that it is a pathology of falsehood or
displacement of meaning, but rather of history itself. Therefore this becomes a common feature among the holocaust survivors.

Works Cited: