

Sayma Khan

Between Agency and Victimhood

Remembering Women in South Asian Partition Narratives

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

ELCH

Studies in English Literary and Cultural History

ELK

Studien zur Englischen Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft

Band 72

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 Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Khan, Sayma: Between Agency and Victimhood.
Remembering Women in South Asian Partition Narratives /
Sayma Khan.-
Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2017
(ELCH ; Band 72)
Zugl.: Goethe Universität, FB 10, Diss., 2015
ISBN 978-3-86821-738-4

D.30

Umschlaggestaltung: Brigitta Disseldorf

© WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2017
ISBN 978-3-86821-738-4

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
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Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier
Tel.: (0651) 41503, Fax: (0651) 41504
Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>
E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de
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To Aysha Khan

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A five-year period lies between the commencement of this research project and its culmination in the form of this present book. During this period, I was sustained by the encouragement of several people, without whom it would not have been possible to complete this project. Amongst these, the greatest debt of gratitude is owed to my PhD supervisor, Prof. Astrid Erll. Her constant support and critical engagement with my work benefitted the project from its preliminary to final stages. Her theoretical precision and guidance helped me to delve into the depths of the research material. Moreover, her thorough close- and critical readings of various chapters and subsequent suggestions were invaluable. My association with Prof. Erll over the years has enriched me not only academically, but also personally; she has always been and will remain a true and great inspiration. I also express my heartfelt gratitude to my second supervisor, Prof. Schulze-Engler, for his immense intellectual generosity. I thank him for his critical insights into various aspects of the project, but above all in regard to my better understanding of the concept of transculturality.

My engagement with South Asian Partition narratives goes back to a seminar conducted by Dr. Nadia Butt at the Goethe University in 2009. I thank her deeply for her constructive criticism of my chapters and our various enlightening conversations on different occasions. Furthermore, discussions with fellow doctoral students in the Doctoral Colloquium at the Department of New English Literatures and Cultures (organized by Prof. Schulze-Engler) helped me rethink and refine certain aspects of the project. I also thank Dr. Pavan Malreddy for his support; and Kyle Greenwood for meticulously proofreading the entire manuscript (despite time constraints).

I am immensely grateful to a number of other people, who helped me overcome unprecedented challenges in the process of acquiring Urdu (primary and secondary) sources for the project. I foremostly thank Nasira Yasmin for travelling with me across Rawalpindi, Islamabad and Lahore and going through numerous libraries and archives to find the required sources. Thanks also goes to Nasir Mehmood, who rigorously searched for the Urdu novels and short stories I needed, and to Dr. Christine Oesterheld for her e-mail correspondence, in which she patiently answered all my questions on Urdu literature. The project benefitted greatly from her suggestions.

Thanks at this stage is also due to various mentors and guides, among them Bernhard Brendel, Rainer Lammert, Mr. Binder, Ms. Schicke, Artemis Roufogalis, and Prof. Len Findlay, who have helped me navigate my course in life. I also thank my friends Anna Ghaeni, Aida Shah-Cashmeh, Colleen Müller, Rebecca Schulz, and Natalie Black for always being there for me.

Lastly, I express my profound gratitude to my family members for, basically, everything. I thank my mother, Tahira Yasmin, for her unwavering support and for being a pillar of strength; my father, Muhammad Amir Khan, for his general encouragement; my maternal grandparents, Sultan Begum and C. Muhammad Akbar, my uncles

Waqar Ahmed and Nasir Mehmood, and my aunts, Asifa Yasmin, Nasira Yasmin and Arifa Yasmin (with all of whom I spent seven wonderful years of my childhood) for their unconditional love. In particular, I am deeply indebted to my three aunts and my sister, for instilling in me the passion of pursuing knowledge.

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I. INTRODUCTION



Remembering South Asian Partition.
Outlook Magazine Online. "Frontcover." Web.

The August 2005 issue of the Indian weekly news-magazine “Outlook” was an “Independence Day Special.” A cursory glance at the front-cover suffices to reveal how the historical events of Indian independence and Partition have been publicly remembered up until very recently. The cessation of British Raj on the Indian subcontinent in 1947 marked the creation of two sovereign nations, India and Pakistan. The term South Asian Partition or simply Indian Partition stands for the creation of Pakistan on 14th August 1947.¹ The scene on the “Outlook” front-cover, notably a remediation of Leo-

1 Pakistan was divided into West Pakistan and East Pakistan. East Pakistan became a sovereign nation, Bangladesh, in 1971.

nardo da Vinci's 'The Last Supper,' evokes memories of the last phase of British rule over India. Mohandas K. Gandhi, centrally positioned in the composition, is surrounded by two groups of people – one on each side. The group on his right depicts Louis Mountbatten (last viceroy of colonial India), Jawaharlal Nehru (member of the Indian National Congress and India's first prime minister) and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (member of Indian National Congress). The group on Gandhi's left depicts V. Patel (member of Indian N. Congress), B.R. Ambedkar (a jurist and India's first law minister) and finally Muhammed Ali Jinnah (leader of the political party Muslim League and the first governor general of Pakistan). Whilst keeping the original 'Last Supper' in mind, the scene immediately imparts the idea of these being the final days of unity and foreshadows an impending catastrophe; yet, at the same time new beginnings are underway. The declaration of betrayal in the image's original context is of no less significance here, since the division of the country into India and Pakistan at the dawn of freedom was seen as a disloyal act by proponents of a united India.² Gandhi, the dynamic and psychological center of the picture, is not looking ahead but has his head hung down – denoting resignation. The tripartite structure of the picture, with Gandhi as the central figure accompanied by a group on each side is especially indicative of the various prevalent political and ideological stances at the time of independence/Partition: Louis Mountbatten, Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad were proponents of a united India; on the other hand, Mohammed Ali Jinnah ardently advocated a separate nation for Muslims.

Divergent views regarding the future of a post-colonial India were advanced during the 1940s and various discussions concerning the transfer of power were held amongst Indian politicians and British officials.³ After a long process of negotiation, the ultimate decision of partitioning the country along religious and communal lines was undertaken. The depiction of the scene on the magazine cover can in certain ways be seen in conjunction with the views or portrayal of independence and Partition in Indian national narratives. The rather eye-catching caption "Heroes and Villains of 1947" emphasizes the polarized public image of politicians (as good 'or' bad); however, the explanatory note on the left "No one was white. Or black. They shaped India with a band of bit players. All enacting their own scripts"⁴ adds a revisionist stance to the understanding of the events of 1947. Not only is the role of all politicians viewed critically, but an overall nuanced perspective is put forward. Notably, the front-cover also draws upon the long-lasting legacy of Partition. Printed on the upper-hand left side of the cover, one reads "Khushwant Singh on 1984 Sikh riots." It alludes to the fact that the political and social ramifications of Partition can still be felt today, i.e. the

2 It is to be noted here that 'Outlook' is an Indian news magazine. The aspect of betrayal is not prevalent in the Pakistani national and/or public discourse, which primarily views Partition as a celebratory event.

3 E.g. 'The Simla Conference' (1945) and 'The Cabinet Mission' meeting of 1946. The latter paved the path for independence as well as for Partition.

4 Outlook Magazine. "Frontcover." Web.