Women in the Partition of India: Graphic Narratives

Arunima Dey, Salamanca

The biggest exodus in human history came with the Partition of India in 1947, the bloody clashes of faiths, belongings, identities, and even languages made the partition an ongoing narrative.¹

The partition of the Indian subcontinent into West and East Pakistan (the East now a separate country called Bangladesh, since 1971) was seen as the inevitable price paid for the freedom of the country from the British colonial powers. History witnessed the migration of over twelve million people and communal violence to a degree that left over a million dead, more than 75,000 women were abducted and many people were rendered homeless; either on a temporary (ranging from few months to decades) or a permanent basis.

But is being homeless merely a geographical, area-defined literal fact? Is the concept of country and home mutually exclusive? Does one authorize the legitimacy of the other? Before 1947, for Indians, the understanding of home was neatly within the parameters of what they defined as their country. However, in the aftermath of partition that witnessed mass migration, people were left bewildered; their impression of what constituted the three-sided markers of self – nation, identity, home – was now found to be conflicted.

The India-Pakistan border was mapped out within a period of just 40 days by the British lawyer Cyril Radcliffe. This led to an incredibly

¹ Litwa 2013, 250.
hurried drawing of boundaries, ripe with ignorance regarding the geographical, political and most importantly, the cultural aspects of the two states, Punjab and Bengal, which were partitioned for the creation of Muslim majority nation of West and East Pakistan respectively. Post partition, thousands suddenly found themselves without a home and effectively without a nation. The lines were drawn and many found themselves on the wrong side of the border. Their religious identities, whether one is a Hindu, Muslim or a Sikh, took precedence over their national identity. The notion of belonging was redefined; you belong to your religion and that defines your legitimate location. The seduction of religion was such that millions got drenched in the bloodbath of communal hatred. For those who were (relatively) lucky and found themselves on the right side of the border, there was a radical shift in their understanding of home as well. Those who stayed behind were left in a barren wasteland that no longer resembled their home. The concept of home now only remained in some crooked memory of their past, which in the current light of religious barbarism seemed almost fantastical.

The history of partition, which can be found in abundance, does a remarkable job in articulating the official facts, but the personal narratives, especially that of women, seemed to have gone amiss. Under the shadow of the grand-narrative, where individual realities are rendered speechless, this is when fiction or partition literature becomes the mouthpiece, the medium for that other history, which has so far remained untold.

This paper concentrates specifically on the aspects of graphic retelling of the partition by referring to the book *This Side That Side: Restorying Partition* (2013). Considered to be first of its kind, this book is an anthology of graphic partition narratives from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, curated by Vishwajyoti Ghosh. The narratives depict the effects of partition on individual lives rather than the actual event of partition itself. The anthology does not only try to retell partition history but attempts to capture the nostalgia for a home and loved ones lost. It includes twenty eight short graphic stories, each unique to its style of narration and artwork that accompanies it.
However, as is the aim of this paper, I shall be looking at selective stories that deal with the women’s question.

With these graphic tales, I try and unravel the uncanny and uncomfortable silence that follows when we ask ‘What happened to the women during Partition?’ The last two decades of gendered reading of partition undertaken by feminist sociologists like Ritu Menon, Kamla Basin, and Urvashi Butalia have attempted to deal with problematic issues such as social situation of women within their families and communities, patriarchal dominance over women’s bodies and sexuality, and ultimately, the act of mythologizing them as symbols of the nation state. This reflects strongly upon how during the time of partition, the patriarchal state dealt with what they considered the woman issue. Deniz Kandiyoti in her essay “Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation” argues:

The integration of women into modern nationhood epitomized by citizenship in a sovereign nation state somehow follows a different trajectory from that of men.

Let us keep Kandiyoti’s statement in mind as I move on to the short stories. The first story I look at is titled Border by Kaiser Haq and illustrated by Hemant Puri. The narrative starts with a young man searching for his lover. He arrives at a frontier town, and as the story proceeds, the concept of borders, nations and love bend into each other. The microcosmic event of lost love intertwines with the loss of homeland (cf. fig. 1).

In the last picture from the story, which depicts a man lying presumably dead on what appears to be a map, various places are marked with pins, and names of places appear all around him, subsuming him, while a bird perches above him on a branch. In many partition narratives, a bird represents an uninhibited, borderless freedom that humans lack. This is a strong image by the illustrator to end

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2 As each story runs for several pages, the paper will discuss selective illustrations that were found to be most potent in their form and style of depiction of ideas, which they seek to convey.

the tale. However, what I would like to focus on is the cover photo of the narrative (cf. fig. 2).

Fig. 1: The ground appears like a map. The cracks may be interpreted as the barbaric partition lines tearing apart the lives of so many as depicted by the image of the defeated man; by Hemant Puri (Haq 2013, 49).
Fig. 2: The young girl playing hopscotch with the borderlines not only highlights the challenging of the idea inherent to partition that one belongs either on this side or that, but when read through a gendered perspective, it can also be said to be representative of the boundaries set by patriarchy that the young girl appears to be playing with; by Hemant Puri (Haq 2013, 43).

The little girl in the picture has one foot lodged right on the border of two territories (or rather countries?), while her second foot remains in mid-air. Her shadow goes beyond the boundaries, while her slippers lie on her far left. *The girl is neither here nor there.* The dangling foot gives a sense of uncertainty, a lack of belonging. The slippers, which may be read as a symbol of home, are placed conspicuously on either sides of the border, indicating a divided homeland, and yet again, stressing on the peculiarity of borders. Boundaries are made not just to define *us* but they also mark the *other*—them. But what use are borders when what lies on one side is exactly identical to the other? Whether it was Punjab or Bengal, Hindus and Muslims shared the same culture, history and language. The girl here is not depicted
as nation-as-woman but a person who is uprooted and unsure about where and what is *here*. Her shadow cannot be contained, much like the past traumas of partition that cannot be so easily erased from the lives of the people. The girl is shown to be playing hopscotch, and as per the rules of the game, she must hop on one foot past all the squares marked on the ground and must be careful not to step on the boundaries. This becomes a very potent retelling of the partition; one either belongs in India or in Pakistan, or one gets left behind in No-Man’s land (as was the fate of the young man in the previous picture). The girl wobbling on one foot is in a precarious position, and she must not lose her balance and fall on the wrong side. Furthermore, the rules of patriarchy need to be endured. Hence, she must remain firmly within the boundary and the sanctioned space allotted to her by the male dominated society. This picture can be considered a unique depiction of woman because the girl is not portrayed as a symbol of Mother-Nation but rather as an individual.

The depiction of the nation as a nourishing mother with her earth-womb, her fertility and her land-body corollary, who needs to be protected by her sons, have been utilised innumerable times in history. Each woman, therefore, embodies the nation-mother, who needs to be sheltered from the tyrannical Other and must be kept within the secure space of the private, safeguarding the values of their culture and nation. Women as mothers ensure the continuity of the nation. In *Woman-Nation-State*, Nina Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias observe that feminist literature had “generally failed to consider the reproduction of national, ethnic and racial categories”. A woman’s body is not just the locus of national identity, but the body itself is interpreted as constantly reaffirming the boundaries of the nation state and religious community. As we see in the story, if loss of love denotes loss of nation, then the unattainable woman in the story represents the border that cannot be crossed. Deniz Kandiyoti writes:

> The regulation of gender is central to the articulation of cultural identity and difference. The identification of women as privileged bearers of identity and boundary

Yuval-Davis – Anthias 1989, 7.
markers of their communities has had a deleterious effect on their emergence as full-fledged citizens.5

Mythologizing women in the role of Mother India undermines them as citizens in comparison to their male counterparts. Identifying woman with the mythical elevates her to a pedestal from where she is to be revered and protected, but at the same time it devalues her as a citizen, since she lacks any active functional identity and space apart from the passive, submissive one, which has been assigned to her by the state. This picture refrains from any such implications. However, the illustrator’s choice of showing a young girl raises the question if such a female identity, which is free from any restrictive patriarchal norms enforced upon it, is only possible when the woman is portrayed as a desexualized, prepubescent child.

The next two stories, with splendid use of their artwork, attempt to transcend the position assigned to women as described by Ritu Menon in her book No Woman’s Land as “presumed to be outside history because they are outside the public and the political, where history is made. Consequently, they have no part in it”6. The two narratives deal with loss and grief caused by separation from loved ones in the aftermath of partition. Appupen and Arundhati Ghosh’s Water Stories revolves around the river Padma and its implied mythical quality. The river becomes a symbol of home and life left behind in a country that is no longer theirs. And in Tina Rajan and Vidrohi’s Noor Miyan, the narrator reminisces about the friendship between his grandmother and her Muslim kohl seller. The partition causes Noor Miyan to leave for the newly-created Pakistan, and the loss of her kohl seller and friend leaves the grandmother’s eyes and her life stripped of colour and joy.

5  Kandioty 1991, 443.
6  Menon 2004, 3.
Fig. 3: The barbed wires, the locked trunk and the dark receding figure of Noor Miyan reflect the irreversible finality of the Partition; by Tina Rajan (Vidrohi 2013, 64).
Fig. 4: The dreamlike, fantastical quality of the picture stands in defiance to the concreteness of boundaries; by Tina Rajan (Vidrohi 2013, 65).
Fig. 5 (above) & 6 (opposite): While the intricate designs on the boat pertains to traditional Indian art, the surreal river made up of eyes flows past the barbed wires, defying the manmade borders; by Tina Rajan (Vidrohi 2013, 66–67).
And in this way, for one last time,
I applied Noor miyan’s surma to my grandmother’s eyes.
While the first picture (fig. 3) depicts the street vendor Noor Miyan portrayed as a dark receding silhouette, and barbed wires and a locked trunk symbolising a sense of finality and inevitability, the concreteness of the picture is in contrast to the next one where the grandmother seems to have a dreamlike quality about her; she appears to be floating and is beyond boundaries (fig. 4).

In the final pictures (fig. 5, 6) of the story, as the grandson releases his dead grandmother’s ashes into the river, he says: “As I scattered her ashes into the river, I felt, this river is no longer a river but has turned into her eyes”.7 As the river is not inhibited by borders, he states: “And in this way, for one last time, I applied Noor Miyan’s surma8 to my grandmother’s eyes”.9 The artwork of the story is a delicate blend of surrealistic imagery coupled with pastoral imagery and Indian folk art.

Similarly in Water Stories, the female protagonist, who has grown up listening to mysterious stories about the unforgiving river, which she had learned to associate with her lost home on the other side of the border. Finally in an attempt at self-discovery and in search for her true identity, she goes “looking for the river in the other land”.10 The last lines of the narrative go as follows: “And slowly, as she became the river . . . they saw the large yellow moon rise in her dark, dark eyes”.11

While countries and borders are land-defined, the river in the story becomes a symbol of transcendence. A man is defined by his country, his religion and his nationality. A woman, on the other hand, is essentially given her identity by her male kin; firstly by her father and then by her husband. For women, their identity and sense of belonging is anchored to the private space of home, which denies them the right to be a part of political and historical events.

7 Vidrohi 2013, 66.
8 Surma is the term used in Punjabi and Urdu for kohl.
9 Vidrohi 2013, 67.
10 Ghosh, A. 2013, 134.
Fig. 7: In the end of the story, the young woman, in search of her identity, becomes the river. Similar to the flowing river, her identity negates the notion that lines drawn on a map has the authority to fixate on a rigid definition of a person’s identity based on the sole factor of one’s nationality; by Appupen (Ghosh, A. 2013, 135).
This precise denial of national/political identity to women is what these two stories try to subvert. If land is the territory for men to conquer and encroach, depicting women as flowing water reflects a sense of infinite universalism, which cannot be contained within boundaries. As men fight over borders, women transcend them. Being associated with the perpetually moving river as opposed to the stationary and fixated land, allows for them to attain an ethereal identity, which is not inhibited by male-imposed ideas and definition of self in terms of country and religion. The water being the universal life source supersedes the manmade lines drawn on maps.

The final story we look at is Tabish Khair and Priya Kuriyan’s retelling of An Old Fable in which the King invokes Reason and Law to cut up a child into equal halves when two women claim to be the baby’s mother.

The King here represents the British colonial powers. The two women, one clad in salwar-kameez and the other in a sari, represent the Muslims and the Hindus respectively, while the child symbolises undivided India. Interestingly, this story chooses to depict the country not as Mother India but rather as a baby. A probable explanation could be that independence from the British signified (re)birth of the nation.

Fig. 8: The two women take the role of Hindu and Muslim community while the baby in the centre represents undivided India; by Priya Kuriyan (Khair 2013, 18–19).
The story constantly evokes Law and Reason and makes a mockery out of it — as the story goes, the king laments: “Both these women are claiming the child for their own. How bloody unreasonable!”

He then decides to cut up the baby in three parts (signifying India, and East and West Pakistan). The tale is a rather straightforward narration of how the British orchestrated the Hindu/Muslim divide, which led to the partition of the country but what draws my attention is the representation of Hindus and Muslims as women in the beginning of the story. To understand why it is significant, I refer to Edward Said’s illuminating work *Orientalism*. In a nutshell, Said notes that the West always defined itself as superior and masculine; the one which was rational, strong, cultured and enlightened, while in its opposition, the East was considered inferior and feminine; barbaric, uncivilized, weak and lacking good sense. Henceforth, according to

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*Fig. 9: The illustrations give a satirical commentary on the British’s concept of Law and Reason; by Priya Kuriyan (Khair 2013, 16–17).*

Khair 2013, 21.
Said, this masculine/feminine dichotomy became one of the legitimising reasons as to why the feminised, weak and uncivilised Indians needed the powerful, all-knowing British to rule over them. During the colonial period, the Indian male was constantly portrayed as a weakling, lacking physical strength and mental determination. Therefore, in the event of independence and in the aftermath of partition, the Indian (and Pakistani) men were subsumed by the intense need to prove their manhood by protecting and controlling their women on one hand, while abducting and raping women belonging to the other religion on the other hand in order to reaffirm their masculinity and virility.

Rape became a symbol of forceful penetration, destruction and scavenging of one’s country, religion and honour, all of which the female body symbolised. Mutilation of breasts and marking of the genitals with religious symbols were perverse methods used by the two communities to indicate that they were branding the other’s rightful territory as their own. Scarring of women’s reproductive parts posed an ideological threat regarding the continuation of one’s religious and ethnic community. Violence against women was not treated as crimes committed towards women as citizens or human beings, but the atrocities were seen as acts that were meant to humiliate men and belittle their religious identities. The identities of women were vanquished, as Ritu Menon observes: “Not only do women have no country, they cannot even call their bodies their own”.

Now, if we return to the story keeping the aforementioned ideas in mind and see the two mothers as not symbols of religious sects, but rather view them as just women, we notice that they are completely devoid of a voice. The women’s pleas for the baby are dismissed by both races of men; I quote from the story: “These women! They don’t know what is good for them and their babies”. Their

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13 Menon 2004, 7.
14 Khair 2013, 26.
Fig. 10: The two crying mothers are shown as mere silhouettes; the faceless figures signify the denial of identity and rights to women in the social and political sphere; by Priya Kuriyan (Khair 2013, 25).
lack of authority is apparent regarding the child. Even when the women are seen as individuals, their rights as mothers cannot supersede what is defined in the story as Justice and Law, no matter how arbitrary that maybe.

In conclusion, the partition of India cannot be simply put aside as just one of the events that occurred in the obscure past. It cannot be seen in isolation to the present as the tremors of its consequences still retain enough strength to affect the functioning of the quotidian postcolonial Indian life. Until recently, and apart from a few handful evidences, which were meticulously brought forth into the folds of mainstream history in the last two decades, attempts to uncover, learn, articulate and interpret the situation and role of women during the time of partition was met with a stark void, an abyss of silence.

The selected stories discussed from this anthology of graphic narratives give us an opportunity to understand how women during the partition communal riots served as markers of national and religious ideologies where their bodies were treated as boundaries and sites for religious battles to be fought, thereby negating their identity as individuals. These stories, through their artwork and narration, demonstrate a possibility of transcendence and freedom from rigid and inhibiting boundaries. Borders are made on land by man, while the feminine river flows beyond it. Finally, one can claim that these graphic stories, by ingenious union of storytelling and visual representation, throw light upon the lives of women who had lived through and witnessed a time of great communal hatred that was further instigated by the patriarchal hegemony of the nation state and religious community.

Arunima Dey: Currently a Doctoral student at the Department of English, Universidad de Salamanca. Her research includes feminist and border theory specifically dealing with partition literature from the Indian Subcontinent.
Bibliography


