RedFame

Studies in Media and Communication
Vol. 11, No. 2; 2023, Special Issue
ISSN: 2325-8071 E-ISSN: 2325-808X
Published by Redfame Publishing
URL: http://smc.redfame.com

Tangible Heritage and Intangible Memory: (Coping) Precarity in the Select Partition Writings by Muslim Women

Sana Asif[1], Sukhdev Singh[2]

[1]Research Scholar, National Institute of Technology Patna, Ashok Rajpath, Patna, 800 005, India

[2]Assistant Professor, National Institute of Technology Patna, Ashok Rajpath, Patna, 800 005, India

Correspondence: Sukhdev Singh, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2nd Floor, CWRS Building, National Institute of Technology Patna, Ashok Rajpath, Patna, 800 005, India.

Received: December 23, 2022 Accepted: February 18, 2023 Online Published: February 22, 2023

doi:10.11114/smc.v11i2.5935 URL: https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v11i2.5935

Abstract

The partition of British India into two sovereign independent nations of India and Pakistan in 1947 was one of the most defining moments of the socio-political course of the sub-continent. The fight for independence from colonial rule and the rise of nationalism rooted in the religious discourse of two prominent religious communities- Hindus and Muslims, led to a precarious situation in the general atmosphere of the nation. It was even more pronounced in the case of women whose voices were marginalised and underrepresented in the discourse.

Building on the theories of precarity and applying the theories of feminist geography, this paper aims to investigate how, through the everyday materiality of heritage spaces and historical memory, Muslim women tried to cope with the precarity of the time. It further aims to highlight the role of tangible and intangible heritage and memory in making sense of place in the select partition writings by Muslim women.

Keywords: precarity, Muslim women, partition, heritage, architecture, memory

1. Introduction

British India was partitioned into two sovereign independent nations of India and Pakistan in 1947, thereby changing the socio-political course of the sub-continent The struggle for independence from British rule and the rise of nationalism rooted in the religious discourse of two major religious communities - Hindus and Muslims - precipitated a precarious situation in the nation's general atmosphere. It was more apparent in the case of women, particularly those from the religious minority, whose voices were marginalised and underrepresented in the discourse.

Precarity could be understood as a socio-political-economic condition of vulnerability in the trajectory of life. While the concept is predominantly applied in labour economics and the liveability of an individual life, it could be understood in the colonial and postcolonial aspects of social, political, economic, and cultural insecurity of the quotidian experience of life. Judith Butler's theory on precarity concerns itself with the liveability and grievability of life (Butler 2009, 2004). Charles Masquelier has compared the theories of precarity proposed by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, which they have discussed in terms of governmentality, power, knowledge, and habitus (Masquelier 2019; Foucault 2007; Bourdieu 1991; Bourdieu 1998) while Gediminas Lesutis (2021) discusses the spatial concern of precarity in the context of violence.

Feminist geography refers to the study of applying feminist theories to the field of geography to read, understand, and interrogate women's relation to public and private spaces and the embedded manifestation of patriarchy in geography and attempt to interpret and make meaning of the spaces from the female gaze. Grounding on the theories of precarity (Butler 2004, 2009) and applying the theories of feminist geography (Massey 1994; McDowell 1999; McDowell and Sharp 2016; Ardener 2021; Rose 1993), this paper aims to investigate how, through the everyday materiality of heritage spaces and historical memory, Muslim women tried to cope with the precarity of the time. It further aims to highlight the role of tangible heritage and intangible memory in making sense of place in the select partition writings by Muslim women.

2. Colonial Precarity

British colonialism in India created a precarious situation for Indians with the drainage of wealth from the colonised to the colonisers and apathetic subjugation of the people. It became more pronounced in the last few decades of colonial rule with the two world wars and the demand for partition of British India based on the rise of nationalism rooted in religious

fervour. Indians were made to fight for the British in the wars. Indians, particularly from the marginalised section of society, predominantly faced the brunt of colonialism. The absence of grievability of life, which renders it precarious (Butler 2004), was made apparent in the case of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre or the British-manufactured famine of Bengal. Building on the theories by Butler, Foucault, and Bourdieu, it might be argued that precarity is a complex phenomenon rooted not only in the economic and financial terms as it is often discussed in reference to it but as much in the cultural and social aspects of life.

It is to be noted that the voices of Muslim women are underrepresented in the narratives of Partition (Ali 2009; Lambert-Hurley 2018). The handful of Muslim women writing in English in British India while being the colonial subject had 'class privilege, gender disadvantage and minority status' (Jackson, 2018). Their identity and subject position are crucial in understanding and providing insight into the discourse of the time from a unique perspective. In this paper, an argument will be built in the context of select anglophone Partition fiction by Muslim women.

Muslims considered themselves a 'rootless nation tied to time and not space' (Masroor 1987). This lack of spatial rootedness, combined with the loss of power and privilege in colonial India created a precarious situation for the Muslims of India. With the struggle for Independence from the British and the looming fear of Partition, the dwindling fate of the *zamindari* (feudal) system, the cultural barrier in working for a living, and the constant fear of being abducted, raped, mutilated, and killed in the religious riots preceding and succeeding the Partition of British India, put Muslim women in a vulnerable position. This paper will critically analyse how Muslim women novelists portray the everyday coping and survival strategies of Muslim women in their works. *The Heart Divided* by Mumtaz Shah Nawaz (1990) and *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Hosain (2009) is coming-of-an-age novels of young Muslim girls belonging to the feudal class set in the second decade of the twentieth century. While *The Heart Divided* traces the socio-political happenings immediately before Partition, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* describes the precarious condition in the few decades leading up to the Partition in 1947 and the years succeeding the traumatic event.

3. Heritage and Historical Memory as Coping Mechanisms

Muslim women tried to cope with the precarity of life in colonial India through the quotidian performance of memory and heritage. Tangible heritages like historical monuments and gardens functioned as the site of progressive, liberal for the young generation who sought the historical syncretic culture of the Mughal era in an attempt to transpose it in the present communally tensed political and social atmosphere. While walking through the Shalimar Garden in Lahore, built by the Mughals, Zohra, the protagonist of the novel *The Heart Divided* (Nawaz 1990), imagines the glory of the garden in the historical past. She remarks, 'what a wonderful sight this must have been in the old days when a thousand and one lights burned in the niches behind the water' (Nawaz 1990, 137) in an attempt to reimagine the glorious past in the uncertainty of the present.

Moreover, these historical monuments provided and functioned as a third space for these actors where they were at liberty to meet and could talk without restraint. Deriving from Bhabha's concept, the third space could be understood here as a neutral space where the boundaries temporarily collapse for free intermingling between different communities and genders (Bhabha 2012). The heritage sites provided the space for people of different religious backgrounds to meet and get involved romantically, which was otherwise quite tricky due to gender segregation practices in most private and public spaces, which is apparent in *The Heart Divided* (Nawaz 1990) when Zohra, a young college-going woman, met a man who was not related to her, for the first time in the historical Shalimar Garden. On the other hand, Habib and Mohini developed a romantic interest in each other and discussed the socio-political environment of the country without any reservation. In the architecture of the syncretic past, they sought unity and cordiality between their two religious communities. Commenting on Shalimar, Mohini pointed out,

> Is it not perfect, like a pearl in a delicate setting? It is Muslim, as Muslim as you are, Habib, yet how well it fits in with the setting of Hindustan around it. They don't clash, they merge and mingle together, each lending the other a greater beauty and a deeper significance. There is no conflict between them, only a perfect understanding' (Nawaz 1990, 138).

While the architectural space of Shalimar Garden being built by Muslim rulers is rendered a Muslim character, it infers the foreign lineage of Muslims and is different from the rest of the country, even though intending to imply the nonstrenuous amalgamation of the two cultures. Habib responded by connecting architecture and religion to the connection between him and Mohini, 'As there is between us, Mohini' (Nawaz 1990, 138). The subtext in the rhetoric of the imagined union between the two communities also hinted and serves as the metaphor for a romantic and possibly marital union between the two individuals practicing a different religion. This re-imagining was made plausible in the tangible heritage of the syncretic past, which provided the space to subvert and reinterpret the dominant discourse. The tabooed Hindu-Muslim love affair between Habib and Mohini continued with them expressing their feelings for each other in the lakes of Char Chinar and their intention to marry at Nishat Bagh, the history of both locations being associated

with the Mughal empire.

However, the evocation of the past in the spatial milieu of the heritage spaces and memory of the historical past served different purposes to different characters dealing with the precarity of the situation. These spaces provided refuge in its past glory and hope for the future when the present appeared to be uncertain. Sughra, sister of Zohra, who was quite conservative in her outlook, when faced with the prospects of arranged marriage in rural Multan, a place where the lifestyle of the inhabitants was more inhibited than that of hers in urban Lahore, she imagined and consoled herself in the historical memory of other Muslim women who were in the background of conquests of Muslim leaders.

> She felt a thrill when she thought of the past glories of Islam, and of the many heroes who lived in the annals of history. She would be true to her heritage, she, who was a proud daughter of a proud race. She looked up once again at the crescent moon with its accompanying star and a joy that was almost like pain welled up within her. She would live up to her ideal of Muslim womanhood. A dutiful daughter, a loving wife and devoted mother. That is what she wanted to be. Her menfolk would go into the world to do deeds of valour and daring, and she would be there in the background to encourage and to inspire. Her name would not figure in history books, nor appear on the pages of the newspapers, but life would have its own significance and a quiet beauty that the turbulent might well envy. (Nawaz 1990, 7)

It could be noted that Sughra develops a constant pattern of seeking affirmations and consolation in the historical memory of the past when faced with the 'maddening uncertainty' (Nawaz 1990, 76) in her present circumstances and precarity of life. She was unhappy in her marital home and life. In her solitude she imagined her escape into the historical past, 'The glorious past was so different to the drab present. So different that she longed to escape into it, to retreat from dull reality and to lose herself in dreams' (Nawaz 1990, 115) Sughra daydreamed of an almost romantic encounter with the historical Muslim leaders. She imagined seeing the armies of Salahuddin marching into her city, and 'as they passed below her window, she bent down and flung the leader a deep-red rose, and he raised his head and smiled — (Nawaz 1990, 115).'

Sughra's precarious situation expressed as a 'tangled web of dreams and disillusionment' (Nawaz 1990, 215), found an outlet into the future through the birth of her son. When her dreams of ideal wifehood failed to materialise, and she failed to re-create the romantic historical Muslim past in her domestic life, she sought it in her version of perfect Muslim motherhood to realise her vision of historical glory in the future of her son. She hoped to inculcate in him a true example of Muslim manhood' so that 'he would revive the glory of the heroes of old by deeds of valour and of daring' and 'fulfil all her hopes and aspirations' (Nawaz 1990, 215). Sughra's hopeless re-imagination of the past and a failed attempt to re-create it act as an escape route from the vulnerable and uncertain present she experiences both at personal and communal levels.

Similarly, Laila, a young girl belonging to the *Taluqdari* (feudal) family, in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (Hosain 2009), found solace and comfort in the familiar landmarks and places. After the death of her grandfather, when the family was traveling from Lucknow to their ancestral village Hasanpur, Laila remarks, 'I forgot why we were in the car in my enjoyment of driving past the places that were dear to me because they were a part of my memories of living and growing up' (Hosain 2009, 89). The grief of the death of her grandfather and the upcoming funeral, the precarity of her life as the future of her life and education lay dwindling, depending on the decisions made by the new patriarch of the household, her Uncle Hamid, the sight of the familiar places soothed and consoled her when she almost forgot the grim reality of the present circumstances. The personal and historical memory associated with these heritage spaces of the city, including palaces, gardens, bridges, mosques and Imambaras, churches and malls, brought relief during the uncertain times.

After the Partition of British India and the abolition of *zamindari*, the feudal class lost their power and privilege. Laila's family was forced to sell *Ashiana,* her childhood home in Lucknow. While Laila was facing a precarious situation due to the loss of class privilege and the death of her husband to war, she decided to visit *Ashiana* one last time. She reflected, 'My most private emotions were contained by this house, as much a part of its structure as its every brick and beam. Its memories condensed my life as in a summary' (Hosain 2009, 272), thus, inferring how the familiar heritage spaces associated with glorious historical memory or happy personal memory provide refuge from the tumultuousness and precarity of the time. Laila's aunt Saira, unable to come to terms with the momentous social, economic, and geographical changes, resorted to her pre-marital way of life, following the practices of gender segregation and trying to maintain the grandeur of her old life in a failed attempt to re-invent the past through inherited culture and tradition.

> She had clothed herself in remembered assurances of power and privilege just as the story-book Emperor had donned his non-existent clothes, but there was no one to make her see the nakedness of her illusions…The fabric of her illusions had begun to wear thin, but it wrapped her in simulated warmth. Her eyes refused to see dust and decay; they created a twilight that did not pick out cobwebs. She had continued to live in Ashiana through an ever-decreasing number of servants made it more and more difficult to keep the house in good order. It began to mock its erstwhile grandeur. And events beyond her control became increasingly pitiless (Hosain 2009, 275, 6).

It could be seen that even though seeking refuge in the architectural grandeur of the past functioned as a coping mechanism for Aunt Saira to deal with the losses in post-partition India, the distancing from the present reality posited a practical problem that almost appeared comical and farcical.

4. Conclusion

Muslim women dealt with the precarity of their situation in seeking refuge in tangible and intangible heritages and memory. The architectural spaces and the memory of the historical memory served as a coping mechanism for Muslim women facing precarity. These spaces served dual purposes. While being associated with the syncretic history of Hindus and Muslims in pre-colonial India, they functioned as the site of communal harmony. Their association with Muslim rule and the apparent 'Muslimness' inbuilt into its history served as a reminder of the lost power and glory of the Muslims in precolonial India.

However, the meaning-making practices of these heritages by Muslim women shifted in the post-partition time. Although seeking refuge in the architecture and cultural heritage of the past is impractical and almost appears farcical but at the same time assists them in providing comfort and solace in their precarious situation.

References

Ali, R. U. (2009). Muslim Women and the Partition of India: A Historiographical Silence. *Islamic Studies*, *48*(3), 425-436.

Ardener, S. (2021). *Women and Space: Ground rules and social maps*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003135081

Bhabha, H. K. (2012). *The location of culture*: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). Language and Symbolic Power Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. *PressBourdieuLanguage and Symbolic Power1991*.

Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Acts of resistance: Against the new myths of our time*. Polity Press.

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. Verso.

Butler, J. (2009). Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics. *AIBR. Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana, 4*(3). https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003135081

Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*. Springer.

Hosain, A. (2009). *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. Penguin Books India.

Lambert-Hurley, S. (2018). Narrating Trauma, Constructing Binaries, Affirming Agency: Partition in Muslim Women's Autobiographical Writing (*Partition and the Practice of Memory* (pp. 115-136). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64516-2_6

Lesutis, G. (2021). *The Politics of Precarity: Spaces of Extractivism, Violence, and Suffering*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003178569

Masquelier, C. (2019). Bourdieu, Foucault and the politics of precarity. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, *20*(2), 135-155. https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910x.2018.1549999

Masroor, M. N. (1987). *Shadows of Time*. Chanakya Publications.

Massey, D. (1994). *Space, Place, and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press.

McDowell, L. (1999). *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315824871

McDowell, L., & Sharp, J. (2016). *Space, gender, knowledge: Feminist readings*. Routledge.

Nawaz, M. S. (1990). *The Heart Divided*. ASR Publications.

Rose, G. (1993). *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*. Polity Press.

Copyrights