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For What Is Identity without a Stake in One's Country?

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On August 14/15 2007 the peoples of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India commemorated sixty years of independence from British rule. Nevertheless, the celebrations of the three nations' freedoms will always be tempered by the fact that Independence was followed by the splitting of the former colony into India, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (now Pakistan). The Partition of India in 1947 left approximately ten million people as refugees and claimed the lives of one million more. While many histories choose to separate Independence from Partition, for most people Independence is synonymous with the bloodshed of Partition, and the communal hostilities of 1947 still haunt the politics of South Asia. Every outbreak of violence between India or Pakistan's different religious communities is compared with Partition. The division of India was connected in media reports to the undeclared Indo-Pakistan war over Kashmir in 1965, and to the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 that led to the independence of Bangladesh. More recently the communal rioting in Ayodha in 1992 and the renewed conflict over Kashmir in 2002, that involved the possibility of a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan, were linked again with Partition.

Women were arguably the worst victims of Partition having to endure not only the destruction of their homes, displacement and violence, but also abduction, prostitution, mutilation and rape as they became "a sign through which men communicated with each other" (Das 1995: 56). Atrocities were enacted upon the bodies of women as men of one religious group sought to dishonour the men of another faith by proving them impotent in their inability to protect 'their' women. In the aftermath of the division of India women suffered once more as the newly independent states of India and Pakistan attempted to reinforce their legitimacy by forcibly recovering abducted women, a process in which women's own wishes were deemed irrelevant. Furthermore, many of the women who desired to be reunited with their families had to suffer the ignominy of rejection by their communities which viewed their experience as too shameful to facilitate reintegration.

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The sense of dishonour felt by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in the decades post-Partition offers a part-explanation for the initial reluctance of historians and novelists to write explicitly about the traumas that followed Independence. There has been no attempt by the governments of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to confront the horrors at the 'cracking' of India and there have been no court cases against war criminals in any of these nations that could be compared to the Nuremberg trials in Germany in 1945 or the Eichmann trial in Israel in 1961-62. No official bodies have been established in an attempt to confront the horrors of 1947 that could be considered analogous to, for example, South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The absence of discussions or representations has led to commentators such as Veena Das, Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin repeatedly employing phrases such as "collective amnesia" and "conspiracies of silence" when discussing historical versions of the Partition of India. In *Translating Partition*, a recent collection of Partition stories and literary criticism, Ravikant remarks upon the "collective censorship" that the Indian nation has practised over the last sixty years:

> *Till recently, we as a nation, in fact, have been sleepwalking through these decades until an odd film or a novel, or the actuality of a riot awakens us to momentarily remember and refer back to the nightmare of the Partition. The nation has grown up, ritually counting and celebrating birthdays – its own and of the great souls that won it the freedom – while systematically consigning the Partition to oblivion. (Ravikant 2001: 160)*

The "sleepwalking" to which Ravikant refers, and the Indian nation's hope of "consigning the Partition to oblivion", has been encouraged by numerous official accounts of Independence and its aftermath, that have underplayed the scale or ferocity of the communal conflict (Ravikant 2001: 160). The historian Gyanendra Pandey believes that the unwillingness to address the atrocities can be explained by the Indian and Pakistani governments' desire to present the movement from colonial subjects to independent nations as an orderly process. Both nations hoped to portray the violence as a freak occurrence with no place in their modern civilised nations, and to separate the constitutional process of Partition from the disturbances that

accompanied it. This depiction stands in stark contrast to the remembrances of the two nations' populations for whom Partition was the violence.

In the last twenty years or so there has been a resurgence of interest in the scission of India, both inside and outside of South Asia, and a greater willingness to examine Partition. This has been evidenced through the publication of more interrogative historical accounts, via collections of oral testimonies and reminiscences, in anthologies of short stories and in translations into English of Partition novels, not to mention selections of literary criticism, and the arrival of new novels that focus upon 1947 as either a central or peripheral part of their narratives. My doctoral thesis examines the manner in which women's experiences of Partition were portrayed in primary sources such as newspapers from 1947, and in secondary historical texts, alongside literary representations of the division of India. It explores six novels that depict the splitting of India: Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *The River Churning* (1968) by Jyotirmoyee Devi, *Cracking India* (1988) by Bapsi Sidhwa, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) and Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999). It discusses the potential role literature can play in supplementing or interrupting non-fictional accounts by offering alternative perspectives on the division of India. It considers what these texts reveal about the events of 1947 that may not have been portrayed elsewhere, and analyses the literary methods employed in representing such traumatic occurrences.

During my investigation of the depiction of Partition in Anglo-Indian newspapers in August 1947, I found that two of India's leading Anglo-Indian newspapers, *The Pioneer* and *The Statesman*, included special Independence Day supplements within their editions of 15 August that recounted the stages leading up to freedom, but also looked to the future of India. Both supplements included articles on the new opportunities for Indian women post-Independence, while simultaneously elucidating the new nation's expectations of its female citizens. It is on these two commentaries that this paper concentrates primarily.

Before interrogating these columns more closely it is useful to evaluate the roles Indian women played in the decades preceding Independence, and the attitudes of the

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nationalist movement towards women. On the one hand, nationalist leaders, such as Gandhi, encouraged women's inclusion in India's social and political life in non-violent protests, which offered women the chance to participate in the public sphere and to build solidarity, creating conditions that could allow women to break away from domesticity. On the other hand, he did not challenge patriarchal mores and emphasised the maintenance of the 'correct' female functions of wifehood, motherhood and the management of the household. Indeed, women were presented frequently by nationalists as the embodiment of an idealised home-life, or as a loved woman in danger for whom the male population should be prepared to fight. The leaders of the Indian Independence movement were keen to employ the concept of Mother India to galvanise the population into demonstrating in favour of home rule.

As the Independence movement gathered momentum in the early twentieth century the hostile debates between colonisers and colonised concerning issues such as *sati* (the self-immolation of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres), widow remarriage and the age of consent were deemed of secondary importance by Indian nationalists, and women's issues became just part of the demands for self-government. Nationalists attempted to balance two somewhat incompatible goals insofar as they wanted to reform India by selectively adopting western business and industrial practices, while maintaining a true Indian selfhood. Partha Chatterjee has suggested that the strategy employed to marry these conflicting purposes was to divide the world into an outer commercial sphere and an inner spiritual sphere of the home. For Chatterjee, women became of central importance in sustaining the traditional Indian home-life and were seen as representatives of the Indian character. The status of women was elevated in relation to their management of the household, while demands for women's rights were forgotten in favour of nationalist ideals. Chatterjee's theory provides a useful framework for investigating the position of women within the freedom movement but, as Priyamvada Gopal argues, is rather generalised and can be criticised for shifting the focus away from the "women question", and of subsuming debates about women's status into larger arguments concerning the battles between tradition and modernity in India, or between East and West. Chatterjee does not examine in any depth how women were proactive in demanding amelioration in their rights during the fight for Independence and there is, as Gopal puts it, "something limiting about the assumption that the 'nationalist mind' was always already male and

that the issue of national 'self-identity' was fundamentally a crisis of masculinity" (Gopal 2005: 61). Nevertheless, both Chatterjee's discussion, and Gopal's analysis, substantiates the ambivalent attitude towards women's part within the struggle for nationhood, and the uncertainty regarding their future circumstances in a new India after 1947.

The vacillation in public attitudes towards women's roles in a 'free' India can be seen in the Independence Day supplements produced by *The Statesman* and *The Pioneer*. Both supplements include articles on the future of women in South Asia with *The Statesman* exploring the "New Task" faced by women, while *The Pioneer* proclaims how the female population was on the "Eve of Independence". In her column in *The Statesman*, Rose Marie Hodgson seems uncertain as to what Indian women's new task will be precisely. In her opening paragraph Hodgson suggests that, whatever these new parts will be, the decisions affecting women's lives will be their own as, "Now is the time for women to consider what they have to offer their country and what they want from it; what those special qualities are which they command, and how they must set about finding and making opportunities to exercise them" (Hodgson 1947: 8). Hodgson places the onus firmly upon women to establish themselves and, rather optimistically, assumes that their will be no societal impediments to prevent women from elevating their standing post-Independence. There is also a concentration upon what women can do for their countries, rather than upon how India can empower its female citizens. Hodgson does not anticipate women having to fight once more for their rights and legal status, and believes that reflection and self-analysis are all that is required to discover the new responsibilities awaiting women after colonial rule has ended.

As the article develops, it appears that the social and political influence for women envisaged by Hodgson is based around a rather stereotypical view of perceived 'female' qualities. She asserts that social problems such as illiteracy, hygiene and disease, and housing issues are problems that are "essentially a challenge to women", and also that women's "great and special influence" will be useful in ensuring peace between the Muslim and Hindu communities, and throughout "the world in general" (Hodgson 1947: 8). Hodgson is confident about women's capacities to have an impact on national and international issues, but her comments are horribly ironic given the

experiences of women during Partition. Women were not only unable to ensure peace between the different religious groups, but became the main victims of the communal brutalities after Independence.

Hodgson offers her readers a female role model in the form of Mrs. Pandit, the sister of Prime Minister Nehru, who was the first Indian woman to hold a cabinet post, and who was India's ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1947. Although Hodgson later praises this "outstandingly able woman", she concentrates upon Mrs. Pandit's "womanly approach" to diplomacy and how the ambassador intends to win over Muscovites through cookery, although it is made clear that it will not be her demonstrating the culinary arts of India as "she has taken her cook along" (Hodgson 1947: 8). Mrs. Pandit's ability to concentrate on international political issues seems far-removed from the lives of 'ordinary' Indian women, who did not have the luxury of a cook to reduce their workloads. Those women who took on new jobs post-Independence often found that these had to be fulfilled alongside their traditional familial duties. Hodgson seems keen not to offer women too much freedom and strives to becalm worried males. She assures readers that, while there have been "great advances in women's marriage and property rights", the research of "numerous sociologists, both men and women, have given soothing reassurance that the majority of women will always make matrimony, husband, home and children their life-work by choice" (Hodgson 1947: 8-9). Hodgson does not reveal her sociological sources or what her evidence is for concluding that most Indian women would prefer a life of domesticity to a career outside the home, and she shows no awareness of the possibility that legal rights in themselves do not necessarily improve a society's attitude towards specific groups of citizens. In the decades after Indian freedom further legislation was enacted regarding women's rights in relation to marriage, property and employment, but this was not always easy to enforce due to the inferior position most women were in financially and educationally, and given the social pressures placed upon them not to pursue their grievances.

Hodgson's uncertainty about the nature of the lives of women in independent India is mirrored, to a degree, by the advertisements that surround her article. Lister Antispetics celebrate freedom from colonial rule by quoting from *Bandemataram* ('Worship the Mother'), one of the anthems of the nationalist movement, which

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venerates Mother India and her peacefulness and homeliness, qualities that do not sit easily with calls for greater female emancipation. The reverence apparent in this paean to womanhood was sadly forgotten when violent conflict broke out between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs during Partition. In contrast, the Harrison Trading Company shows little awareness of the importance of the date of publication, and offers instead "desirable textiles", "French perfumes" and "ladies' dress accessories" presumably to the remaining Europeans, and to the aspiring middle and upper class Indian women (Hodgson 1947: 9). The two adverts share a desire to place women on pedestals, albeit for antithetical reasons, and both offer images of women's lives that are far-removed from the experiences and hopes of the vast majority of Indian females. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita have noted, "pedestals are extremely precarious places" and it was this symbolic positioning of women within their communities, as the mothers of future generations, and as the upholders of the honour of different religious groups, that led to them becoming the targets for sexual violence in 1947 (Tharu and Lalita 1993: 173).

Dr. B. N. Majumdar, writing in *The Pioneer*, prefaces his article on the future of Indian womanhood with an italicised summary of his argument that offers a more nuanced reading of the problems facing Indian women, and of the solutions required:

> *The woman and the cow have both suffered the same fate in India. The deification of both has brought untold misery on them. No country in the world has thought more kindly of them. Yet in no country in the world is their lot more miserable. Unless and until the women of India are educated and emancipated, no one can view the future with equanimity*. (Majumdar 1947: 9)

Despite the unpromising opening when the author equates women with beasts that fulfil a fairly one-dimensional role, it is clear that this comparison is intended to emphasise the mixed blessings of female "deification", underlining how a woman can be held in high and low esteem simultaneously (Majumdar 1947: 9). His later comments describing how "wars have been fought for women" predict the horrific violence, rapes, mutilations, and abductions endured by thousands of women during India's subsequent Partition, when women's 'elevated' status led to their bodies

becoming a battleground for men of different religious faiths (Majumdar 1947: 9). Throughout his exploration of the "woman issue", Majumdar shows a praiseworthy commitment to the education and emancipation of women, and an opposition to social practices such as *purdah* (the shielding of women from the sight of men or strangers via a curtain, screen or veil), and to what he perceives as the under-employment of women in Indian industry. He castigates any male readers who have not yet accepted the need for female empowerment alongside national independence: "Those of us who still think that women should remain in the kitchen or at home and rear up the family have not read the signs of the times" (Majumdar 1947: 9). Unfortunately for most Indian women, Majumdar's progressive views were not shared by communities throughout the nation in the aftermath of Independence, as the old patriarchal mores were reinforced once colonial rule had ended.

Nevertheless, there are aspects of Majumdar's discussion that could be seen as running counter to the main thrust of his argument. In the opening paragraph, his first sentence is striking, if not somewhat disturbing, as he states how, "Women are neither 'apes' nor 'morons', neither are they 'angels'" (Majumdar 1947: 9). All three nouns seem entirely inappropriate to describe the lives or qualities of Indian women in the mid-twentieth century, and his selection of these terms could be viewed as belying the socially liberal credentials he is keen to establish elsewhere. By placing the nouns in inverted commas, he may be trying to distance himself from such perceptions, but his choice of such language helps to explain how Indian men were able to dehumanise women during Partition, and to enact all manner of atrocities upon their bodies. There are also hints in the article that, despite his call for female emancipation, Majumdar does not foresee women having too much agency in their lives post-Independence: "Unless the women come out to share our cause, to think with us, to fight our battles and until the unrest of women can be canalised and harnessed for productive or constructive purposes and we liberalise our views on sex and associated matters, the future of the country cannot be viewed with equanimity." (Majumdar 1947: 9) On one level, this sentence posits a shared future for men and women, and reinforces the call for a liberalisation of social values, but the choice of conjunction and personal pronouns, "*Unless* the women come out to share *our* cause, to think with *us*, to fight *our* battles" (emphasis added), implies that this is almost an ultimatum, and that women will have little say over their future roles (Majumdar 1947: 9). Majumdar's

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comments concerning the need for active female participation in the freedom movement mirror Hodgson's hopes for women's peace-making role in *The Statesman*. His desire that women should, "fight our battles", foretells once more the violence that thousands of women faced as Partition followed Independence (Majumdar 1947: 9). Furthermore, the employment of verbs such as "canalised" and "harnessed" suggests that the positions open to women in a free India will have been selected carefully, will not offer much opportunity for self-expression or originality, and will be controlled strictly (Majumdar 1947: 9). Dr. Majumdar's willingness to speak for women in *The Pioneer* is matched by Rose Marie Hodgson's plans for India's female population in *The Statesman*. Significantly, neither writer offers the words or opinions of Indian women themselves. This was a methodology repeated by the leaders of India post-1947, as legal rights for women were enacted, but with little change to social practices, leaving many women feeling short-changed by the new nation.

In her recently-published exploration of religious extremism in India, the British Indian journalist, Edna Fernandes, investigates various explanations of fanaticism and propounds reasons for the continuing communal violence. She suggests that one of the underlying causes of fundamentalism is the degree to which some religious groups have felt excluded from India's economic and social development, and she asks, "For what is identity without a share in one's country?" (Fernandes 2007: xxiv) Sixty years after Independence the majority of Indian women could be forgiven for asking the same question. In 1974, twenty seven years after freedom, the Committee on the Status of Women in India prefaced its report, *Towards Equality*, with a letter addressed to Professor Hasan, the Minister for Education and Social Welfare, in which it concluded: "Our investigation has revealed that large masses of women in this country have remained unaffected by the rights guaranteed to them by the constitution and the laws enacted since Independence" (Guha et al. 1974: n. pag.) In 2005, thirty one years later, the Nobel Prize winning economist, Amartya Sen, examined various types of gender inequality in India. He examined six indicators of potential gender bias: survival inequality, natality inequality, access to unequal facilities, ownership inequality, the unequal sharing of household benefits and chores, and domestic violence and physical victimisation. In all six categories he found significant negative disparities in the life chances available to women as India entered the twenty first century. From the outset of his discussion, Sen divides his

examination of gender issues into “Well Being” and “Agency”, differentiating between women’s welfare and the possibility of their having influence on their own destinies (Sen 2005: 221). While considering these two elements separately, he is keen to emphasise how they are intertwined: “From the crude barbarity of physical violence to the complex instrumentality of health neglect, the deprivation of women is ultimately linked not only to the lower status of women, but also to the fact that women often lack the power to influence the behaviour of other members of society and the operation of social institutions” (Sen 2005: 239).

As long as Indian women are denied equal access to education, to employment, and to financial resources, and are viewed as existing primarily within the domestic sphere, then their opportunities for genuine agency will remain limited. The problems experienced by Rose Marie Hodgson in August 1947 in *The Statesman*, and by Dr. Majumdar in *The Pioneer*, in deciding the exact nature of women’s roles and responsibilities, and rights and freedoms, in the new nation still persist in Indian society. In Anita Desai’s novel, *Clear Light of Day*, the central female character, Bim, reflects upon the stultifying home-life that she experienced during her childhood in the years surrounding Independence, and how this dullness “took on the intense aspect of waiting […] for some greater event, some more drastic change, a complete reversal of their present lives, and the beginning of a new, wondrous phase” (Desai 2001: 122). Bim’s sentiments can be extended to the lack of significant progress in the societal status of women in India post-Independence, and to the betrayal of women’s hopes for greater emancipation after 1947.

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