

Revisiting Partition through Anirudh Kala's *The Unsafe Asylum: Stories of Partition and Madness*

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Abstract. The 1947 Partition of India resulting in the emergence of two independent countries: India and Pakistan caused a huge hellish situation in terms of the murder, rape of innocent women, displacement and exchange of the lakhs of people on the basis of religion. This horrifying event is generally considered to be the most inhuman and macabre one in the world history of modern era. In *The Unsafe Asylum: Stories of Partition and Madness* (2018), Anirudh Kala, psychiatrist and a sensitive personality has attempted to delve into the psychological and emotional aspects of both the Hindus and the Muslims affected by the Partition and its aftermath. The mental patients were also exchanged during partition between the two countries that is Muslim patients were sent to the mental hospital in Pakistan and Hindu patients were sent to the mental hospital in India. The book accounts the distress of Rulda Singh and Fateh Khan, two mental patients who got separated with this exchange.

Keywords : Partition; trauma; madness; displacement; stress disorders.

‘IS IT PARTITION TIME AGAIN?’ MAASKED WHEN I DROVE HER TO THE STATION TO PUT HER ON A TRAIN. FEELING HER HEART POUNDING AGAINST MY CHEST, I PATTED HER ON THE BACK AND SAID, ‘DON’T BE SILLY. PARTITIONS DO NOT HAPPEN EVERY DAY.’ — BUT THAT WAS LATER.

The Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 on the communal lines and its aftermath can be called one of the biggest anti-human atrocities incurred on the millions of people irrespective of their castes, classes and religions. It was literally a geographical line which was drawn without considering the humanitarian perspectives on the map, notoriously developed by Radcliffe, but in reality it was a horrible tragedy which drew several divergent and convergent lines or marks on the minds of people, making them mentally and psychologically unstable for life. The literary narratives dealing with the country's Partition and its severe direct or indirect effect

on the people concentrate on the entire community's individual trauma and collective trauma. Thousands of citizens crossed or were compelled to cross the India-Pakistan border during 1947, during the Partition of British India. The horrifying and painful experiences, fears, trauma — unexpressed and suppressed — in both India and Pakistan caused an indelible impact on the mental health of the affected and suffered. A lot has been written about Partition and its severely bleak impact on human's psyche from the political, sociological, religious and economic viewpoint, but there has remained a gap in the psychological study of the trauma and trauma-caused-madness that gripped the Partition refugees and still have been causing the transgenerational effect on the offspring of those victims. It is no doubt the invisible by-product of this tragedy.

In the short story collection titled *The Unsafe Asylum: Stories of Partition and Madness* (2018), Anirudh Kala, a Ludhiana-based reputed psychiatrist, the founder of Indo-Pak Punjab Psychiatric Society and an author, has attempted to vividly depict the politics-driven geographical divide's irreversible and truly pathetic impact on the mental health of those suffers. It is noteworthy that Dr. Kala also belongs to a Partition victim family which had to migrate from the present Pakistan. He who has worked on the mental health initiatives between India and Pakistan is well-suited to uncover the trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) or psychoses. His first hand experiences in both India (Amritsar) and Pakistan (Lahore) with mental patients affected by the Partition have inspired him to compose and uphold the pangs and sufferings of such genocide-causing politically motivated divide benefitting the politicians, not the innocents multitudes. In this context Kala's own comment is very much relevant to note :

Mental health is still not a priority in our country, so we can imagine how things would have been 70 years ago. What people went through is so painful that they fail to even describe it. They have chosen to suppress it. Numbness follows when the pain gets unbearable. People who went through this great tragedy chose to bury their feelings and fears, for it was just too painful to revisit. The impact of the Partition on the mental health of people is the least talked about

aspect of this tragedy, (quoted by Divya Goyal in her 2018 article “Partition of the Minds” published in The Indian Express).

Most of the Partition literary discourses explicitly defy his piteous ideological repertoire to produce or project some of the finest psychological documentation of the Partition and to give the different facets of violence a neat socio-economic colour. The unprecedented violence and killings in those unrelenting times of politically chaotic upheaval gave birth to psychic disorder and madness hitting the innumerable individuals in the milieu. Regarding the Partition-caused violence Ashis Nandy in his Editorial to the book *MAPMAKING: Partition Stories from Two Bengals* (2011) categorically pinpoints his critical observation on the writings of Manto and others:

Manto was one of the very few who faced without flinching the psychopathic and sadistic aspects of the carnage. In his world, numbers did not count and living did not fire any better than the dead. I cannot forget some of the brief, unused one-liners he left behind as notes for his future work. In one, an arsonist complains of the all-round decline in morality; he had been sold adulterated petrol that would not set a house on fire. The violence of Partition, for Manto, was not so much the triumph of unreason but that of perverted reason. Indeed, some victims have complained to us that, in those tumultuous times, even some of their own community took advantage of the all-round collapse of norms and either settled old scores or beggared their own relatives and friends. Such experiences frame Pratibha Basu’s *Flotsam and Jetsam* and Manik Bandopadhyay’s *The Final Solution* in this collection. (xiii)

In his book *The Unsafe Asylum*, Kala has deeply humane included thirteen interconnected short stories which cover the period from

the Partition and the creation of India and Pakistan as Independent countries in 1947 to 1984 Punjab insurgency and riot in India. As the title suggests, the stories deal with the partition and its effects on mental health indicating that the Partition cannot be branded as an event of the past rather a phenomenon alarmingly haunting people even in the present time. As per the treaty signed by newly created India and Pakistan, exchange of mental patients took place between them resulting in a horrifying conditions and mental states of those patients, as depicted by Manto and others. Kala as a veteran psychiatrist has tried to insightfully and intuitively delve deep into those patients' psychic disorders and the effects on their offspring as well. India exchanged the Muslim patients in its Mental Hospitals for their Sikh and Hindu counterparts in Pakistan. This exchange was carried out without humanistic considerations. The interlinked short stories explore the indelible impact of this narrow politics-driven official decision in both countries, against the larger and wider backdrop of the ongoing consequences of Partition even after the elapse of 7 (seven) decades. Kala has reflectively and artistically arranged the interlinked stories along two major lines: Rulda Singh, a Sikh and Fattu (Fateh Khan), a Muslim, consigned to Lahore's Mental Hospital during the Partition and separation due to the official exchange of the inmates; and the lives and experiences of the Indian psychiatrist Dr. Prakash Kohli and his family, now settled in Chandigarh in India. The stories are located almost equally in Pakistan and India with some overlap between the countries, and in England.

The book is a compilation of thirteen short stories mostly written mainly as first person narratives, and some as third person narratives, set against the backdrop of the Partition of India in 1947. The stories: "No Forgiveness Necessary", "Belly Button", "Partition Madness", "Sita's Bus", "The Diary of a Mental Hospital Intern", "Folie à Deux", "The Mad Prophet", "Love during Armistice", "Refugees", "Smart Alec", "Three Passports", "A Spy Named Gopal Punjabi", and "Rulda's Discharge" have portrayed the emotional and psychological effects of communal riots and violence during and after Partition. All the stories are mainly based on Kala's personal experiences gathered from his several visits to mental health institutions in Pakistan, and also his experience with patients in India.

In the very first story "No Forgiveness Necessary", Rulda and Fattu, inmates at the Mental Hospital, Lahore, Pakistan, have improved

their mental health conditions in due course of proper treatment but they cannot be discharged because neither of their relatives arrives to receive them. Iqbal Junaid Hussain, a doctor at this hospital, has been instructed by the concerned higher authority to prepare a list of all the Hindu and Sikh patients, for deporting them to India after the partition. He is shot dead on his way outside the hospital during the communal riots. After three decades, Iqbal's psychiatrist son Dr. Asif Junaid Hussain visits Phaguara to find out the reason for his father's murder. He comes to know that a soldier Ramneek Singh, who killed his father wanted to avenge his son's murder by killing a Muslim who happened to be an honest dutiful doctor Iqbal. In course of this central story the riot-hit wretched human life has been blatantly and minutely portrayed.

The second story "Belly Button" carries a very powerful message that motherly love and affection of a midwife, here, Roshan Bibi, conquers religious narrowness and myopic insight. Prakash Singh Kohli visits Pakistan as a part of a group of Sikh pilgrims going to Guru Nanak's birthplace Nankana Sahib. Though his visa allows him to visit only Lahore, he with the help of three Pakistani youths goes on to visit Gujranwala where he was born in August 1947. He meets Roshan Bibi, a midwife who helped his mother during Prakash's birth and in spite of her deep seated dedication and love for the new born baby she could not properly do it due to the terror prevailing outside resulting in Prakash's abnormal navel or 'belly button' for life. This traumatic experience remains fresh in the memory of Roshan Bibi whose motherly feelings overflow during the meeting after a long gap.

"Partitioning Madness" recounts the phenomenon of the exchange of the mental patients between India and Pakistan, three years after the partition. Rulda Singh in the form of recollection tells his story to the medical superintendent Mohinder Singh and Prakash. The story ends with Prakash questioning the medical superintendent on how it was possible that more than half the patients who were to be sent to India died in the years after the partition and before the execution of exchange:

'How can four hundred and fifty patients die in three years?'
 'The Lahore hospital report of 1947 says it was cholera.'
 'Would cholera kill just one religion?'
 'GOK'

'GOK?'
 'God only knows, I know that I do not want to know. It is time to move on.' (71)

This is clearly indicative of the degree of inhumanity, frenzy and flux operating during and after Partition and even the mental patients were not spared of such heinous cruelty.

In the story “Sita’s Bus”, Harpreet Cheema from Jullundur was married to Manjeet Cheema of a Sialkot-based bus owner family. She starts working as a physical instructor of a school after her marriage, despite her mother-in-law’s unwillingness. During the riot the family plans to move to Gurdaspur where Manjeet’s sister’s family stays. But their house is set on fire by the heinous rioters and she passes out. Harpreet wakes up and with shock sees that she is in a Muslim household and Murtaza has brought her to his home. By the end of the month, Harpreet agrees to convert to Islam and is renamed Firdaus. Finding no other alternatives she agrees to marry Murtaza’s brother Aslam and returns to her previous job.

On hearing about a bangle-seller who is actually looking for Harpreet Cheema, Aslam goes to meet his police inspector friend Farukh who informs them that both India and Pakistan governments have signed a treaty cancelling religious conversions and subsequent marriages. Local police forces have been involved and incentivised to recover such women. Farukh suggests for them to escape to Bhimber located in Azad Kashmir. When they return to Sialkot, a government officer is waiting for them. Harpreet is to be taken to Jullunder where her first husband Manjeet will receive her in a few days. She is pregnant at that time and her fetus is aborted without her consent. With a heavy and broken heart she boards the Delhi-bound bus and on being asked her name she boldly and crisply replies, ‘Harpreet’ and then says ‘Agge pichhe kuchh nahi’ (Nothing before or after). Identifying Harpreet with Sita, the mythical icon of extreme sacrifice, Kala has projected the horrifying telling effect on her mental state during the traumatic sojourn Harpreet-to-Firdaus-to-Harpreet.

In “The Diary of a Mental Hospital Intern”, an intern visits the Mental Hospital in Ranchi for two months and keeps diary for recording the events and his own experience in encountering the mental patients, especially those who have been brought there after exchange of mental patients between India and Pakistan. A story of trauma-born shared psychosis transferred transgenerationally is “Folie à Deux” which is about a couple who moved from Multan to Patiala in 1948. A year later the

woman undergoes a nervous breakdown and horribly develops a psychotic belief that bearded Muslims is threatening to cut off her breasts. The woman runs out and is found at the railway station a few hours later. She is taken to a local Muslim healer and fully recovers over the next few months. Over the next 20 years she goes on to give birth to three children and also endures the loss of her husband. But one day, she breaks down again and jumps over the roof to her death. A year later, her son starts having visions that people are trying to follow and kill him and an ISI agent is always after him. Another year later, his younger sister develops delusion that their mother has been killed by a Muslim doctor. The story comes to an end when the eldest sister enters the narrator's clinic screaming and accusing him of being a psycho killer, "You are a psycho yourself, killer." (123)

In "The Mad Prophet" Dr. Prakash Kohli visits Lahore to meet his friend, Dr. Asif Junaid Hussain and meets with some of his patients, including Haq, who physically resembles Amitabh Bachchan and falls ill every time Mr. Bachchan is sick. One day, Prakash and Asif visit the Lahore Mental Hospital. Prakash meets Fattu who has been living there for forty years and has become known as a prophet among the politicians who believe he can successfully predict events such as the breaking away of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). He is found trying to dig a tunnel to connect the hospital with Amritsar Mental Hospital, so that he can meet his once inmate Rulda. Another story "Love During Armistice" deals with Prakash's unique experience when he and his wife Jasmeet visit Kufri and meet with a boy named Brij who is in passionate love with Benazir Bhutto, whom he saw once, when she was visiting Shimla for the Shimla Agreement in 1972 with her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. He regularly writes 40 letters in two months to her, which a teacher has intercepted and regularly dreams about her. A year later, after Prakash joins the Post Graduate Medical Institute, Chandigarh, Brij is admitted to this hospital for his such mental illness. He has stopped writing to Benazir now as she is visiting him frequently in dreams and they no longer need letters for communication. Without having the dream of Benazir for three consecutive nights he absconds from the hospital. Two years later, Prakash encounters Brij's father while coming out from the Delhi Airport. He tells Prakash that an acquaintance of his met with Brij in Ajmer Sharif the previous week. Although that person did not recognize Brij's face, he could only say that it was Brij for sure because he had a tattoo on his arm which read "Brij Bhushan Bhutto".

The story “Refugees” talks about the life of a refugee like Prakash who has two children now, Anhad and Antara. One day during the Punjab insurgency in India, a beggar gives Prakash an envelope with his name on it, containing a letter and two close-ups of Anhad and Antara and instructing him to contribute forty (40) lakh rupees within fifteen (15) days to the Free Homeland Army for the War of Independence. Prakash moves to England with his family but months later someone from the Free Homeland Army approaches once again, invites him back to Punjab and gives him the well-preserved copy of that letter given to him the previous year.

In “Smart Aleck” on the way to Rawalpindi from Lahore to attend a conference, Prakash meets Jaffer Hussain, a Barrister-at-Law at the Lahore High Court. Prakash expresses his keen interest in the condition of mental patients after the Partition and the latter discusses a similar exchange of prisoners and how under-trial Muslim prisoners charged with serious offenses opted for Pakistan in order to avoid punishment. In this context Jaffer tells the story of one of his clients named Ali, hailed from Faizabad who was charged with murder. In the end, we find out that Ali is none but Jaffer himself. Again, Ram Avtar Mishra from Ayodhya loved a Muslim girl named Mehrunnisa and secured a fake certificate stating that he had converted to Islam as there were high chances of getting acquitted in Pakistan due to the lack of evidences as well as witnesses. In course of time he was acquitted and he got a permit to visit India using a fake certificate of his mother’s severe illness. But he was stopped at the first rail station on the ground that the permit was no longer valid and an Indian visa on a Pakistani passport to visit India was needed.

The story “Three Passports” is an exploration of the existential crisis being faced the partition victims from generation to generation. Prakash’s son Anhad Kohli, an Indian national, married a Pakistani woman named Siddique. They have a 3-year-old daughter named Sehrish who is a British citizen. The family plans to visit India for Diwali. The visa officer tells Siddique that getting an invitation to a conference will increase her chances for getting the visa on time. Anhad’s father Prakash arranges for them to attend a conference in Jalandhar. Tthough Siddique gets a visa to visit only Jalandhar, she still goes to Chandigarh with Anhad and Sehrish to celebrate Diwali with family.

“A Spy Named Gopal Punjabi” is a thrilling story of a spy affected by partition. Sami is a former [ISI](#) agent living in Rawalpindi with his family and tells the story of a spy named Gopal, a Punjabi by birth, whose parents were brutally murdered during partition. He worked with the Intelligence Bureau of India and after working as a stenographer at the Indian High Commission in Pakistan, he worked on behalf of the Intelligence Bureau in Amritsar. He also joined the mental hospital and worked to identify Indian antecedents of mental patients who were returned to India. Once he crossed the Indo-Pakistan border in order to meet an informer but was apprehended by the Pakistani Rangers. On being caught he acted like a mentally ill person and he was pushed back into India. On returning, he was disowned by the Intelligence Bureau. After numerous attempts to try and connect with the IB office, frustrated Gopal Punjabi crossed the border again and on being caught, he expressed his wish to meet an officer from ISI and joined ISI. He emerged as a legend in Pakistan and led many successful operations against India and even was responsible for killing many RAW agents. Sami further tells that Gopal Punjabi led a team to Bangladesh 4 years after its formation and died there during that operation. A year later, Sami on his deathbed reveals himself as Gopal Punjabi before his wife Aalia.

“Rulda’s Discharge” shockingly shows that asylum is safer than a civil locality. After getting discharged from the Amritsar Mental Hospital in 1984, Rulda is taken to Delhi to live with his nephew’s family by the latter’s assistant. When they reach Hazrat Nizamuddin railway station, Delhi is gripped in anti-Sikh riots after the assassination of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The mob kills the assistant and somehow ‘petrified’ Rulda manages to escapes the mob, stops a taxi and frantically asks the driver, “Is there a mental hospital in the city?”

The stories discussed above have been interlinked not only the themes of displacement, migration, riot, violence, trauma, psychological disorder, etc., but also by the characters like Asif, Prakash, Rulda, Fattu, and others affected by these man-made phenomena. The actions take place in the places of both India and Pakistan suggesting that both the countries people, irrespective of their social positions and gender equally suffered and succumbed to the physical, emotional, psychological breakdown and death. As a result, family lives were affected severely across religions and regions. Anirudh Kala has insightfully thrown light on the multiple facets of trauma and madness ironically and has juxtaposed the notion of

partition-caused trauma and madness. The stories also focus on the socio-cultural factors resulting in such madness and thus Kala is different from other Partition writers in the treatment of this theme within the present context. In this context the following statement of Qureshi, Farah, Supriya Misra and Asma Poshni (2023) is very much pertinent as such inhuman decisions affect the common innocent people across the world :

Prior to the Partition, India was comprised of a wide array of culturally distinct groups who were violently oppressed and subjected to racial ideologies of primitivization by Europeans that colonized their lands, much like Indigenous populations. Although colonizers of the Indian subcontinent did not aim to displace native people as they did in settler colonialism, resource extraction, exploitation, and cultural domination were key features of franchise colonialism, likely laying the groundwork for similar intergenerational modes of transmission for historical trauma. With respect to the Partition itself, the event also served to destroy communities and dissolve family ties across the region, much like events in the Americas and the Pacific. (1)

To conclude, Anirudh Kala's creative discourse endowed with layers of suggestions evidently emphasizes that the very geographical and spiritual division of the ordinary peace-loving citizens projects a powerful demonic threat to humanity as well as the core human values. It causes the devastating and terrifying imprint on the lives of ordinary people who are not involved in such political decision of dividing a nation without any regard to the universal idea of humanism to maintain peace, fraternity, and religious freedom. It is thus evident that Kala's fact-loaded fictional discourses covering a wide range of time span from 1947 to 1984 Anti-Sikh riot and dealing mainly with mental patients suggest that the deep carve and scar i.e., transgenerational transmission of trauma caused by Partition and its subsequent effects like displacement, migration, pain, trauma, etc., are so deep and haunting that the affected people and

their successors helplessly carry shock, mental and psychological imbalance and shared delusional disorder and have become the part of 'wounded civilization'. Even the lunatic asylums were not, are not and will not be spared to be SAFE, as crudely communicated by the writer by using the word UNSAFE in the very title of the book.

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