

Trauma of Partition in Veera Hiranandani's *The Night Diary*

Greeshma D

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English,

Nehru Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

Dr. D. Vijayaraghavan

Research Guide, HOD, Department of English,

Kathir College of Arts and Science, Neelambur, Tamil Nadu.

Abstract

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent of 1947 directly witnessed heinous violence and trauma which culminated in the mass displacement of millions of people and numerous deaths. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs were forced to leave their homes and relocate based on their religion across the newly drawn border between India and Pakistan. The study delves into themes of home, displacement, forced migration, and the coping mechanisms in Veera Hiranandani's novel, *The Night Diary* (2018). The book depicts the horrific experiences of trauma and displacement caused by the partition from the perspective of a twelve-year-old girl named Nisha, who was forced to leave her home in Pakistan and travel to India following the partition. The research also explores how forced displacement has affected her identity as she struggles with loss, anxiety, and uncertainty while navigating the harsh reality of the changing world. The enduring trauma of displacement felt across generations is examined through how the author portrays Nisha's journey.

Key Words: Partition, Trauma, displacement, forced migration, coping mechanisms

Introduction

The Independence of India from British colonial rule on August 15, 1947, is one of the most remarkable historical moments. However, the sudden and bloody division of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, two sovereign countries, tarnished the momentous event. The partition primarily drawn along religious lines brought about unmitigated suffering and trauma for those affected by the unprecedented displacement. The partition of India ranks as a horrific and terrible event in human history where millions of people were compelled to leave their homes and forced to forsake their possessions. This is represented in history as one of the largest and swiftest migrations with an estimated 14.5 million people relocating within four years (Bharadwaj, Khwaja & Mian, 2008, p.39). The brutality of displacement was a

stark and horrifying reality that fuelled communities with anger and hostility towards one another, leading to a series of communal violence including arson, looting, murder, abduction, rape, and the mutilation of female bodies.

Numerous literary writers and scholars, including Bapsi Sidhwa, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Urvashi Butalia, Anita Desai, Kamleshwar, Krishna Sobti, Veera Hiranandani, Ravinder Kaur, Vazira Zamindar, Amit Majmudar, among others, have depicted the impact of the partition on the lives of individuals on both sides of the border. Veera Hiranandani, an American author, explores the pain and suffering of refugees during their forced migration in her novel *The Night Diary* (2018), set against the backdrop of the 1947 partition. This analysis delves into how Hiranandani portrays the trauma of displacement experienced by individuals abruptly transformed into refugees, focusing on the narrative of Nisha and her family as they are compelled to abandon their homes in Pakistan and seek refuge in India.

Veera Hiranandani, an American author born to a Jewish-American mother and Hindu father. Among her notable literary works are *The Whole Story of Half a Girl* (2012), *The Night Diary* (2018), and *How to Find What You're Not Looking For* (2021). *The Night Diary* delves into the partition of India, drawing inspiration from her father's childhood experiences of fleeing their home and crossing the newly established border during that tumultuous period. In her author's note, Hiranandani acknowledges "The fictional family depicted in this novel lived in one such area, and their experiences are loosely based on my father's side of the family. My father, with his parents and siblings (my grandparents, aunts, and uncles), had to travel across the border from Mirpur Khas to Jodhpur just like the main character, Nisha, does in this book (Hiranandani, 2018, p.256). Therefore, the novel incorporates significant autobiographical elements based on her father's experiences, who was of a similar age to Nisha during the partition period.

The Night Diary is situated amidst the 1947 partition, a profoundly violent period in Indian history. Narrated through the perspective of 12-year-old Nisha, the protagonist, the novel intensifies the emotional depth of the narrative. Presented in the form of letters, Nisha recounts one of the most pivotal moments in Indian history to her deceased mother, who passed away while giving birth to Nisha and her twin brother Amil. The letters depict the disruptions in pre-partition Indian society leading up to the partition, marked by escalating tensions between Hindus and Muslims culminating in communal riots and significant loss of life. In a bid to safeguard their family, Nisha's father and grandmother opt to leave Pakistan and migrate to India, encountering unforeseen challenges such as harsh weather, scarcity of

provisions, and the looming threat of riots, making their journey far more arduous than anticipated. The anguish of parting from loved ones and possessions and the unanticipated hardships during the migration compound their suffering. While the author's family's migration was relatively safe, the same cannot be said for many others caught in the turmoil of partition. As the author states, "I wanted to understand more about what my relatives went through which is a big reason why I wrote this book" (Hiranandani, 256). Therefore, by narrating Nisha and her family's displacement from their homeland, the author vividly portrays the challenges and hardships faced by refugees during this turbulent period.

Analysis

In her novel *The Night Diary*, Hiranandani addresses the significant issue of unprecedented migration between the two dominions, which was the primary consequence of the 1947 partition, impacting the lives of millions after a period of intense violence. The partition resulted in a horrific bloodbath, characterized by widespread loss of life, with hundreds of thousands of individuals, including men, women, and children, being brutally killed. The most devastating impact was felt by those who survived, now known as refugees, as millions were forcibly displaced, each enduring traumatic experiences. As she says, "The partition came after centuries of religious tension between Indian Hindus and Indian Muslims" (Hiranandani 2018, p.255). Hiranandani portrays the forced migration resulting from religious conflict, illustrating how such involuntary displacement can be perilous, leading to injuries and fatalities. When marginalized groups are compelled to flee their homelands in pursuit of safety in unfamiliar territories, they endure both psychological and physical anguish. This mirrors the partition of India, where millions experienced forced migration amidst unimaginable violence and trauma. Hiranandani's depiction of the train massacres during 1947 vividly captures the harrowing scenes of countless deaths, desperation, and the devastation of lives as Hindus from Mirpur Khas fled the newly formed Pakistan for India. This upheaval and displacement severed human connections with their pasts, homes, communities, and identities, highlighting the destructive nature of such migrations.

Nisha and her family in the novel represent the common experience of Hindu and Sikh families uprooted from the region that became Pakistan, seeking refuge in India. Their journey was fraught with suffering and threats to life, as Nisha's diary entries recount the perils faced by migrants, where civil and religious tensions escalated into violent confrontations during their passage to unfamiliar lands. During the journey, Nisha writes, "I

have seen things I never thought I'd see. There were men fighting. There was blood. I don't know if the train will stop and more fighting will happen and more people will be killed, including us." (Hiranandani, 233). The brutal scenes filled Nisha with dread, contemplating the safety of her family's journey to Jodhpur amidst the looming threat of attackers and marauders. Despite reaching Jodhpur safely, Nisha and her family bore witness to a series of traumatic events, including arson, mass forced migration, and train massacres. During their train journey, Nisha observed a frantic man with his wife, baby, and two boys rushing towards the train in a bid to escape to a new region. The chaotic scene on the platform led to the heartbreaking separation of the family, as the man and one son boarded the train while the wife desperately searched for the missing boy, only to be left behind along with the baby on the platform as the train departed (229). This event not only stirred deep emotional turmoil within Nisha upon witnessing it but also inflicted psychological devastation that impacted her sense of self. Nisha's father, who had observed numerous violent occurrences, further elucidates how, ". . . thousands of people have died crossing the border both ways. . . . He [says] that all kinds of people—men, women, and children have been killed in unthinkable ways . . . He [says] that trains pulled up to stops filled with dead people from both sides of the border." (241). Additionally, Nisha grapples with the emotional anguish of being separated from Kazi, the family cook, due to his Muslim identity. Therefore, migration entails not only the fear of losing loved ones or facing death but also encompasses poignant experiences of trauma and separation.

The theme of nostalgia and reminiscence of the homeland resonates prominently in the novel. Characters like Nisha increasingly hold onto memories of their home while navigating through challenging circumstances arising from religious and ethnic tensions. Nisha begins to recollect the days spent with her family in Mirpur Khas, reflecting on her past experiences and connections to her homeland. She states, "I would have memories of life here in Mirpur Khas . . ." (86). As communal violence based on religion and ethnicity escalated a month before the partition, Nisha and Amil were prohibited by their father from attending school. The separation from her schoolmates left Nisha feeling disheartened. The yearning for school reignited memories of the past days spent with her friend Sabeen, a Muslim, evoking nostalgia for their shared experiences at school. The yearning for school became clear from Nisha's words when she starts to whisper in her father's ear, "When can we go back to school, Papa?" (52). Therefore, reminiscing about their homeland was a prevalent practice during that period.

Similarly, a profound yearning for home is evident in the harrowing scene of enduring the scorching heat of the sun and facing scarcity of water and food, which deeply affected Nisha and her family during their journey. Nisha reminisced about the cherished memories of home, reflecting on the golden days. “. . . of Kazi and the dried apricots, mangoes, and tomatoes he [Kazi] used to make by hanging thin slices in the sun. I [Nisha] loved the chewiness of the dried fruit, their taste pure and sun-filled, no water to interrupt the flavor.” (131)

Similarly, in another instance, as the family struggled to prepare their evening meal amidst scarcity of essential cooking ingredients during their journey, Nisha found herself reminiscing about the easier times when cooking was not a challenge for the family. In those moments, Kazi used to skillfully handle the family meals alone. As Nisha's father began cooking plain lentils and rice without spices, she was transported back to memories of a time when “. . . Kazi cooking in [the] kitchen; back to Dadi doing her normal caring for the house, . . .; back to Papa coming home from the hospital,” (180). Nisha found solace in revisiting her memories, seeking comfort in the past amidst the challenges of the present. Memory played a crucial role in helping her transcend the difficulties she faced. Upon reaching her new home in Jodhpur, India, after a lengthy journey by foot, bullock carts, and trains, Nisha sought refuge in memories of her homeland. She longed to relive the peaceful days of Mirpur Khas, reminiscing about the moments when she was “. . . sitting in the garden at [her] old house on the hill watching the sunset or being alone in the bedroom when Amil wasn't there, or secretly poking around papa's room or the kitchen. There was always something to explore, . . . I [Nisha] also miss Rashid Uncle's house, . . . I [Nisha] miss lying on the couch reading books even if we couldn't go outside. . . . I think a lot about our mango trees, so many of them. I think about the sound of insects and birds at dusk. I think about the sugarcane, and Kazi. I think about Kazi all the time. . . . In some ways, he was my only real friend.” (240)

Erikson's definition of Identity as a "fundamental organizing principle that develops constantly throughout the lifespan" highlights the complex nature of one's sense of self . Identity encompasses various aspects such as social, cultural, religious, economic, linguistic, and experiential factors that contribute to an individual's subjective understanding of themselves (Ragelienė, 2016) .These components play a crucial role in shaping an individual's self-image, which can evolve and strengthen over time (Cherry 2019). The partition of India, primarily along religious lines, disrupted the shared experiences, practices, memories, and relationships that had existed for centuries, leading to hostility, animosity, and

segregation among the populace. This division made it challenging for individuals belonging to similar religious groups to identify as a unified community. As noted by Ram Madhav, the partition not only separated territories but also divided minds. The impact of partition was deeply felt on individual identities, as public discourse surrounding terms like 'partition' and 'Pakistan' fueled confrontations based on religious affiliations, directly challenging individuals' sense of self. This crisis of identity was particularly pronounced among the local population and refugees, who faced harassment and discrimination from their fellow citizens amidst the turmoil and suffering brought about by partition. Hiranandani illustrates Nisha's diary entries reflecting on the fragmentation of a once-unified community into two separate nations, underscoring the dissolution of the unity that had bound together diverse populations. She also portrays the swift transformation of individuals' identities from neighbors to adversaries virtually overnight.

Nisha's perplexity regarding the disparity between her upbringing in Mirpur Khas and the stark reality she faces at twelve years old is understandable. Mirpur Khas, a multicultural town where people of various ethnicities and faiths coexisted harmoniously, began to reveal its underlying tensions as Nisha reached adolescence. She witnessed neighbors who had previously lived in harmony suddenly becoming embroiled in violence, often incited by political or religious discord. The escalating unrest in Mirpur Khas marked Nisha and Amil as early targets of communal animosity based on religious or ethnic differences. Their daily routines were disrupted as conflicts erupted, including an incident where Amil, a Hindu, was pursued by Muslim boys on his way to school due to his religious background. Amil's apprehension and distress over these violent episodes were palpable in his emotional outburst to Nisha. "It's because we're Hindus. . . . There are lots of places all over India where Hindus and Sikhs and Muslims fight one another all the time now. . . ." (19). Nisha, with a Hindu father and a Muslim mother, was raised in a town where Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs coexisted harmoniously before the partition. This pivotal moment revealed to Nisha the fragility of identities that were fluid and evolving rather than rigid and fixed.

Nisha grapples deeply with her sense of self due to her family's diverse religious backgrounds, leading to uncertainty about her own identity and sense of belonging. While others categorize her as Hindu, resulting in her family being singled out, her partial Muslim heritage remains unacknowledged. Struggling to navigate this complex situation, Nisha feels conflicted about aligning with a specific religious identity and can only draw parallels between her personal narrative and the broader context of the nation. "Everyone knows who is Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh by the clothes they wear or the names they have. But we all have

lived together in this town for so long. I just never thought much about people's religions before. Does it have to do with India becoming independent from the British? I don't see how those two things go together." (20) In fact, while analyzing the changing parameters of nationality, Nisha starts to question her own identity. "I guess we're Hindus because Papa and Dadi are. But you're still a part of me. Mama. Where does that part go?" (21). In traditional beliefs, individuals are expected to adhere strictly to a single religious identity, whether Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or another faith, without room for dual affiliations. Consequently, Nisha's inner turmoil regarding her identity stemmed from the societal norms that dictated clear-cut religious allegiances, a reality shaped by religious and communal tensions exacerbated by the partition.

In her depiction, Hiranandani illustrates how the partition, stemming from religious rigidity and communal animosity, resulted in mass displacement and upheaval, transforming individuals from locals to refugees virtually overnight. Furthermore, the narrative highlights the inherent human tendency to conceal behind orthodox beliefs, particularly in times of crisis. These intricate themes are masterfully explored in *The Night Diary* through Hiranandani's innovative storytelling technique of presenting events through Nisha's letters. By portraying the narrative through the lens of a child, Hiranandani effectively intertwines personal experiences with broader societal implications, unveiling the profound tragedy, anguish, and trauma experienced during this tumultuous period. The novel delicately navigates the complexities of identity crises triggered by the partition, the harrowing effects of displacement, and the enduring longing for one's homeland.

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