

**ⁱPARTITION FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE IN IRFAN MASTER'S
A BEAUTIFUL LIE**

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Abstract:

In this paper, I would like to analyse the event of Partition as depicted by a third generation writer Irfan Master in his novel A Beautiful Lie (2011). The novel is unique as it presents the Partition from a child's perspective. The second and third generation writers of Partition based their representation of the event of Partition majorly on knowledge gained from family history and oral testimonies. In case of Irfan Master, he acknowledges his debt to his family history and the knowledge that he receives from his grandfather about Partition. In this paper, I have delved into the subject of postmemorial third generation Partition fiction and the way in which Master has looked back at Partition without having any lived memory of the event.

Keywords: Partition, children, postmemory, family history

‘Itihas mein sirf naam aur tarikh sahi hoti hai, baaqi nahin’.

--Gulab Pandit, social worker

The history of India presents the independence of the country as a glorious event by suppressing the plight of the thousands of men, women and children in the Partition riots. And among these suppressed voices, it is the women who are the worst sufferers as they were the ones who were silenced in the name of family as well as national honour. Partition has never been an event which has been highlighted in the nationalist discourses which believe only in focusing on the aspect of freedom from British rule. First generation writers writing about the event of Partition present immediate responses to the violence and disruption of normal life. But in the year 1998, the testimonies of the survivors of Partition, mainly those of the women, children and the marginalized were published by Urvashi Butalia in her work *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* and those specifically of women were published by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in their book *Borders and Boundaries:*

Women in India's Partition. So the authors of Partition fiction after the year 1998 had the testimonies of the survivors of Partition recorded in written form at their disposal where the survivors of the catastrophic event had talked about their painful plight in their own voices.

Partition fiction writers belonging to the second and third generation have based their works on the information available to them in the form of testimonies, first generation fiction, films, and photographs and finally what they have presented in their fictional works is the result of their research and their creativity. But what is important to note is that these Partition fictions represent varied points of view towards the event and provide a picture of the Partition based on the experiences that people underwent rather than just dealing with it as a historical and political fact with details about the political underpinnings of the event.

The representation of Partition in literary works has not come to a halt after the publication of the testimonies where the victims have spoken in their own voice. Earlier the impression about the function of Partition fiction was that it filled the gaps in the official grand narrative of independence which erased the inhuman suffering of the people during the Partition riots. But the way in which Partition is being represented in the works by second and third generation writers brings into question the efficacy of such a notion. The issue here is then whether the testimonies also fail in a certain way to completely 'reveal' the event or is it at all possible to completely know and understand the event that the writers of the subsequent generation are also trying to reach back to through their writings. It is crucial to understand the subsequent generation's aim in creating literary representations about the event which took place before their birth and about which they have no personal experience. Vinod K. Chopra has written: "One of the reasons why the Partition is time and again remembered is also that creative minds wish to revisit it to learn about the past and derive some lessons from that for the present..."ⁱⁱ.

In this paper, I would like to analyze the representation of the event of Partition by a third generation writer Irfan Master in his novel *A Beautiful Lie* published in the year 2011. Interestingly, the novel has been written from the point of view of a child and thus it provides a unique perspective to the event of Partition.

The author Irfan Master was born in Leicester and his father and mother belonged to countries on either side of the border---India and Pakistan. He also speaks about his conversation with his grandfather who had lived through the Partition as an inspiration for delving into the subject of Partition. Master focuses on his family background as an important element in pushing him towards creating a literary representation of the event. When asked in an interview about his original impulse to write about the Partition, he says:

My family background I guess, my mother comes from Pakistan and my father's from India which renders them culturally different. I was very curious about what this cultural difference really meant when I was a teenager and found it especially odd because they [Pakistan and India] used to be one country. I researched the Indian partition and discovered it was a brutal

time in their shared history. It was the sundering of an ancient culture with a line drawn through a map which divided it into two.ⁱⁱⁱ

Master talks about combining research along with the knowledge of family memory in inspiring him to create a rendition of the event of Partition.

In Master's case, from very early on in his life, he realized that his parents were 'culturally different' and this consciousness led him to question the basis of this difference. Master's father's family had decided to stay back in Gujarat but his maternal grandfather had migrated with his family to Pakistan. It is interesting to note that Master grows up in a Muslim household which constituted of two 'culturally different' Muslim parents. Thus from his maternal grandfather, Master gets to know about the experience of migrating to and settling in a new country meant for Muslims. He inherits the knowledge about Muslims who had migrated to Pakistan and also about Muslims who decided to stay back in India. His is an interesting case where he gets to witness two sets of experiences of the same community.

Through his work, it is Master's aim to make the event of Partition accessible to everyone because he feels that there is a lack of knowledge about the event among the younger population. Master posits his work as one which has the ability to provide knowledge about the Partition and in a way makes hint at the inadequacies of historical and official representation to provide a wholesome understanding about the event. He says in an interview:

... I began to think about writing something about partition specifically aimed at educating younger people. I started asking younger people what they knew about partition and discovered that some hadn't even heard of it. Those that did had a very vague knowledge base. I also discovered that partition wasn't talked about among the adult community....I wanted [the book] to be simple and effective in terms of language and style. I didn't want it to be densely packed with lots of historical information and I didn't want it to be politically obtuse either. I wanted it to be a story about people on the ground. I wanted this to be accessible to everyone from teenagers to 70 year-olds who lived through partition...^{iv}

Moreover in the oral testimony projects, there are many testimonies by survivors who were very young during the Partition thus making this absence of the parents' witnessing influence worth mentioning. This reluctance of the parents to talk about their experience to their children is also found in Holocaust where in some cases

...World War II was often a taboo subject in the homes of children of survivors. Parents tended not to talk about it, and their children rarely, if ever, asked, as they did not want to cause them more anguish. 'When I was born,' said Dina Weinstein, 'my

parents decided never to mention the Holocaust.... They were going to forget all the pain, the past, and start anew, have faith again, I guess'.^v

Arlene Stein also writes in this regard: "For children of Holocaust survivors, parents play a more ambivalent role in the quest for transformation: they hold the status of 'real' victims and are seen as deserving of empathy, and yet their silence, which was designed to protect themselves and their children, is declared to be the immediate problem that demands redress"^{vi}. Thus this aspect of parents not wanting to talk about the painful memories of the past is a phenomenon which Master mentions as one of the reasons why he chose to write about the Partition. In an interview, the interviewer Farhana Shaikh asked the following question to Master:

Partition is something that affected everybody and yet it seems to be one of those things your parents just don't bother to tell you about. How important do you think your story will be to teach a generation of children about what happened and more importantly how it affected ordinary people?^{vii}

Master replied:

Another of the reasons I wanted to write this story was because the Indian and Pakistani communities never really speak of Partition. It was a terrible time and those that lived through the worst of it understandably are reluctant to revisit it. But, it did happen, and it affected millions of ordinary people, the effects of which we still feel today. My hope is that teachers read the book and use it as a resource so that a whole generation has the opportunity to become aware of the significance of Partition.^{viii}

Irfan Master's novel *A Beautiful Lie* is a first person account by a thirteen year old boy called Bilal who tries desperately to shield his dying father from the crushing truth about the partition of the country. His father believes that the unity among the people of India would prevent its partition which has been planned by power-hungry politicians who have conspired with the British rulers. Bilal's father believes in the indivisibility of the country as he says: "India will never be broken, never be split"^{ix}. The voice of Bilal, the young boy sounds suspiciously mature at certain points, particularly when he describes the event of Partition and says: "Partition was like laying flat a piece of coarse material and cutting it as steadily as you could down the middle. The only difference was, once the first cut was made, no amount of sewing and stitching could make that material whole again"^x. Thus the interspersed narrative with the voice of the adult Bilal provides a belated perspective to the novel. Bilal decides to hide the truth about the country's partition from his father by not allowing anyone to visit his father. For this purpose, he takes the help of his three friends--Chota, Manjeet and Saleem. Interestingly, Master creates a group of friends comprising of various religions and creates a picture of harmony among the friends in contrast to the chaos that the country was undergoing at that point. The group of friends thus becomes a contrasting microcosm of peace, fellow-feeling and brotherhood in the macrocosm of chaos and unrest in the country. Even Bilal's father presents the sense of fellow feeling among the group of Bilal's friends:

“Look at your friends, Bilal. Do they care that we’re Muslims? We’ve sat and eaten with Chota’s family on many occasions. Are we supposed to hate them because they’re Hindus? Take Manjeet--I’ve known his family since before you were born. I was at Manjeet’s father’s wedding. They’re Sikh yet we share very similar ancestry and have many things in common. We’ll always have differences but our similarities will keep us together.”^{xi}

The narrative is presented in the format of a coming of age story where it starts with a Prologue and ends with an Epilogue. Both the Prologue and the Epilogue are written from the point of view of the adult Bilal and this frames the narrative of the child Bilal which forms the core of the novel. As Master has projected his novel as one which is aimed at providing knowledge to the people of all ages who lack knowledge about the event of Partition, by presenting the novel from the point of view of a child he might have wanted to project his work as an unbiased one. But it also includes the question of unreliability about the narrative as it is clear from the Prologue that the novel is based on adult Bilal’s memory of the event. This is evident when Bilal says in the Prologue: “Many years ago I told one lie that has taken on a life of its own. It defines me as a person. The only time I was sure of anything was all those years ago, when I was a boy. When I was lying. Since then I’ve never been comfortable with anything in my life”^{xii}. By framing the narrative of the child by the adult narratives, Master has tried to provide a sense of reliability but it does not completely achieve that aim as memory in itself is unreliable and remembering something sixty years after it has taken place makes it equally complicated. Bilal, the adult narrator of the framing narratives and Bilal, the child narrator of the core narrative, both sound equally mature and sometimes it becomes difficult to distinguish between the two.

The novel begins at a place in Northern India called Anaar Gully in the month of June in 1947 which is just a couple of months before the declaration of independence of the country. The novel begins by portraying Bilal as a sensitive and perceptive young boy which furthers Master’s aim of establishing him as a reliable narrator on whom the readers can place their trust for gaining knowledge. Bilal starts his narration by saying “Something was wrong. I could sense it but I couldn’t put my finger on what it was”^{xiii}. This premonition of something ‘different’ in the atmosphere of the market which was the life force of Anaar Gully and around which the locality had flourished, coupled with the awareness about his father’s impending death makes it apparent that Bilal’s life is soon to become tremendously chaotic. The novel’s initiation itself hints towards the impending doom in Bilal’s life and also in the life of the country. The novel brings to its fold a historical event and shows its devastating effect by bringing it into the realm of the personal. Postmemorial fiction on Partition like the work of Master demonstrates the historical event by depicting the effect it has on the psyche of the people who suffer the resulting devastating effects of the aftermath of the event.

The first mention of the word ‘partition’ in the novel is in a context not with which the word has come to be associated with. The partition in the room in which Bilal’s father lies on his deathbed is made “solely of old books stacked floor to ceiling, three books deep”^{xiv}. This is a

stark contrast to the partition of the country which caused the death, mutilation and displacement of thousands of people on both sides of the border. Master uses the word 'partition' for the first time in the novel in a completely different context than it has come to be associated within the collective memory and vocabulary of the nation. The word is generally used while talking about the independence of the country and has almost become synonymous for the same. "The oddity of the phrase 'at the time of the Partition' struck one, therefore, when the aunties and uncles of childhood used it to refer to the independence of the Indian subcontinent"^{xv}. On the day of independence when the sound of celebration could be heard outside, Bilal's father passes away. Interestingly Bilal notices that "a few hardbacks had been pulled out"^{xvi} from the wall of books in the room. The wall had lost some of the strength because of the books that had been pulled out. It points to the weakening of the strength of the nations created by Partition and Bilal "wondered how many you'd have to pull out until the whole wall would collapse"^{xvii}. Bilal's ailing father can be looked upon as a symbol of the ailing country and his death on the day of independence highlights this fact. It is as if Partition did not mark the beginning of the life's journey of two newly formed nations but it marked the death of united India. Bilal says: "He's dying. I know. Like this damned country. Day by day it's slowly falling to its knees"^{xviii}. After his death, Bilal's father burns along with the house and the partition of books which signify the way in which the country burnt due to riots and clashes. Out of this carnage is born India and to Bilal's father, Bilal is India. Bilal is the one who underwent the turmoil of the times which defined his sense of self and made him what he became later in his life.

The character of Doctorji, a friend of Bilal's father is of significance as his name is not mentioned anywhere in the novel. Master has tried to nullify religion by not naming the kind doctor. Master has pointed out that his work is more important than his religion--a fact which people forgot during the Partition riots. People in that chaotic time lost all respect for humanity and even looked upon the doctor with suspicion. Doctorji and Bilal almost face death at the hands of a group of villagers whom Doctorji had been helping with treatment and medicines for many years. In the atmosphere of turmoil, the villagers suspect Doctorji and Bilal as Muslim spies and keep them locked and tied in a house whom where they are rescued by a young girl who loved hearing stories from Bilal. Master depicts the figure of child as the representation of rational thinking who based her judgment on the basis of the kindness and benevolence that Doctorji had demonstrated over the past years. This depiction is in contrast to the adults of the village whom Master depicts to have lost their sense of judgment in the chaotic atmosphere where accounts of violence, looting and rioting had become a part of daily life.

Thus through the characters of the children in the novel, Master creates a picture of communal harmony. In his attempt to shield his father from the news about the Partition of India, Bilal creates a newspaper for his father with the help of his friends and teacher Mr. Mukherjee. Significantly the headline of the newspaper reads "One India"--the image of

united India can only remain in the imagination of Bilal and his fictitious newspaper. Otherwise the novel depicts the reality of Partition in the episode of mob violence after a cockerel fight which Bilal and his friends had gone to watch. After the fight gets over, the mob breaks loose and Bilal is separated from his friends as they try to run to safety. Later when they reunite, Manjeet is visibly shaken with blood on his clothes and he confesses to have acted in self defense: "Men with sticks and knives were trying to kill each other...burn each other...I tried to get away but men kept rushing at me with sticks and knives...I *had* to defend myself...What else could I have done?"^{xix} It is ironic how even children were not spared in the mayhem of the Partition riots.

Interestingly, there are no prominent women characters in the novel which makes it an obvious absence in a novel about Partition as the women were one of the worst sufferers during the Partition riots. As this novel has been promoted as a novel for young adults, Master has not incorporated any obvious disturbing element like the rape, abduction of women which would be inappropriate for readers of that impressionable age. Master only mentions once about the killing of women along with children without told to save his father from the heartbreak of hearing about the partition of the country had shaped him as an individual and how he viewed life.

Thus Irfan Master's work presents a significant representation of familial postmemory of Partition. His novel brings to the fore the memory of those individuals who were children when the catastrophic event of Partition impacted their lives. The novel makes it clear that even after the passage of many years after the event, the effect on the child's psyche remains and he ends up looking at life from a changed perspective because of Partition.

Notes:

ⁱ 'In history books, only the names and dates are correct, not the rest'. As quoted by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in *Borders and Boundaries: Women in the Partition of India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 1998. p. 8.

ⁱⁱ Vinod K. Chopra. *Partition Stories: Mapping Community and Gender*. New Delhi: Anamika Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd., 2009. p. 199.

ⁱⁱⁱ Irfan Master. "Irfan Master". *National Literacy Trust*. Web. 12 July 2016.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Arlene Stein. 'Feminism, Therapeutic Culture, and the Holocaust in the United States: The Second-Generation Phenomenon'. *Jewish Social Studies* 16. 1 (2009) : 27-53. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 June 2016. p. 31.

^{vi} Ibid. p. 41.

^{vii} Irfan Master. "Irfan Master". Interview by Farhana Shaikh. *The Asian Writer*. 14 March 2011. Web. 2 June 2016.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Irfan Master. *A Beautiful Lie*. London: Bloomsbury, 2011. p. 17.

^x Ibid. pp. 17-18.

^{xi} Ibid. pp. 16-17.

^{xii} Ibid. p. 1.

^{xiii} Ibid. p. 5.

^{xiv} Ibid. p. 12.

^{xv} GJV Prasad and Stephanos Stephanides. "Introduction: Poetics and Partition in Counterpoint". *European Journal of English Studies* 19.3 (2015): 243-254. Web. 19 April 2017. p. 244.

^{xvi} Irfan Master. op. cit. p. 274.

^{xvii} Ibid. p. 274.

^{xviii} Ibid. p. 56.

^{xix} Ibid. p. 229.