

Searching for Love, Memory, and Harmony Amidst the Indian Partition Through Chughtai's *Roots*

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Abstract

*The Indian partition of 1947-48, following the country's independence from British rule, is one of the most heinous events in modern history. It recorded a massive migration across the newly formed nation-states and witnessed over a million deaths due to communal violence, gendered atrocities, and forced eviction resulting from the confusion over one's identity and 'homeland.' Ismat Chughtai's short story *Roots* encapsulates the various nuances of the Partition through the eyes of Amma, a Muslim woman, standing symbolic of a generation whose memories remain etched in the warmth and harmony of the pre-partition days. She stands as a witness to the gradual change in her familial circumstances and that of their relationship with their Hindu neighbors over time, due to the formation of the binary 'us' and 'they.' The paper shows forth how love and the sense of 'belonging' that lies at the heart of this short story rupture the differences between the two families and bring back harmony and brotherhood between them, thereby making them remember their 'roots.'*

Keywords: Roots, Ismat Chughtai, matrescence, Indian partition, mard-i-ghazi, Akhand Hindustan

Introduction

The Indian partition was one of the most poignant events in modern history that entails the harrowing tale of one united country being divided by the British into two nation-states in less than a month based on outdated maps, inaccurate census numbers, and minimal knowledge of the land and its culture. Millions lost their lives, and many more became homeless refugees with one question in their minds: who are we? However, even amidst such drastic changes, Ismat Chughtai's short story *Roots* gives a glimpse into how love and harmony were the underlying thread of a country that held its people, belonging to various ethnicities, together for thousands of years, all of which was broken down due to India's very roots being compartmentalized and divided based solely on religion. A rare exception in the oeuvre of Partition literature, *Roots* encapsulates the lives of two families, one Hindu and the

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other Muslim, through the eyes of different generations, how they lived together in harmony, how the partition affected their perspectives, how they dealt with the malignancy caused by rising communalism and violence, and finally betrayed their frustrations for mutual understanding and peace. The paper observes the pre-partition condition of the country and navigates the ways regarding how the seeds of difference between the two religious communities were laid and how the story subdues these differences through memories and nostalgia of Amma, standing symbolic of the older generation, in an attempt to curb the differences, prioritizing brotherhood and love.

One Family, Two Nations: Understanding the ‘Land’ and its ‘Culture’

Ismat Chughtai's *Roots* encapsulates an elderly woman, Amma's, perspective on the drastic differences between the traditional Indian society in peace and the aftermath of madness that the partition set in. Marked by continuous shifts in time, this short story attempts to evoke the reader's emotions through memories about the comfort of staying in one's homeland and, later on, risking one's own safety for it. At the very onset of this narrative, the dire health of the country is expressed through a ghastly image: '...the English had left and, while leaving, had inflicted such a deadly wound that it would fester for years to come. India was operated upon by such clumsy hands and blunt knives that thousands of arteries were left open. Rivers of blood flowed, and no one had the strength left to stitch the wounds (Chughtai 2018, 290). The carefully curated imagery of a bodily wound festering and inflicted with further pain was concurrent with the realities of the Indian partition that resulted in the division of not only a country, a 'home,' but also created enmity and a zone of war between nations, the suffering of which continues even today in the 21st century. Chughtai's sarcasm is further highlighted through the children of the story, who were wreaking havoc within the space of their 'homes' due to a forced holiday 'as if the fifteenth of August had not come at all' (Chughtai 2018, 290).

By referring to the difference in the space of one house to another, the borders of which were being patrolled, the narrator symbolizes the condition of the now divided country into two nation-states, the boundaries of which were demarcated and could not be trespassed. The situation had resulted in a frenzy and chaos that the people who lived in these countries, which were even a few weeks ago one land, could not comprehend, thereby turning them akin to children without the capability of making independent decisions regarding what is beneficial to them. This strategy of paralleling adults to children has been used by countless novelists, including Kurt Vonnegut and William Golding, to highlight the destruction caused

in the name of nation and honor without having the intellectual ability to understand what was actually going on.

However, Chughtai does not stop here; instead, she also layers her story by commenting upon how poverty and ignorance are the two major factors regarding religious fanaticism, portraying how the higher echelons of society, through ideological conditioning, garner the support of the lower classes for themselves, but without any benefit whatsoever for the latter. This is exemplified through the latter's concerns about the daily life struggle of gathering food, which had nothing to do with the games of power being played by using them as pawns. Chughtai's lines that shed light on this dilemma of the lower classes show forth how these people were 'tempted to go to Pakistan by the rumors that four seers of wheat cost only one rupee there and a cubit-long naan only four annas. They were returning as they realized that to buy four seers of wheat, they needed one rupee, and though a cubit-long naan cost a quarter, it still had to be paid for' (Chughtai 2018, 291-292).

It is only after this detailed background that the readers are provided with a glimpse of the narrator's family, who were initially ignoring all such disturbances, till finally provoked

and threatened as a result of a feud that broke out due to Chabban Mian's inscription of "Pakistan Zindabad" on the school wall versus Roopchandji's children, who wrote "Akhand Hindustan" in retaliation and were up in arms. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson had pointed out that 'nationalist imagining . . . (has) a strong affinity with religious imagining.' (Anderson 2006), in the sense that both of these aspects can bestow meaning and continuity into death and fatality; and secondly, by ideologically preparing people to sacrifice themselves for these invented nations, the cultural roots of nationalism with death may be drawn. However, Kavita Daiya (2008) reveals that as per the unofficial narratives that were recorded of the events of the 1947 Indian partition, "the nation did not demand self-sacrifice so much as it demanded and permitted killing (of)...those who were deemed "other" to it according to religion." (Daiya 2008 , 71), an aspect highlighted through this particular event in the story.

The difficulties that arose from such actions were further promoted through the behavior meted out to the children by the adults, thereby providing a stark comparison between the previous and current circumstances. The narrator mentions that had it been the usual

environment, then the children would have gotten a beating and been sent off to Roopchandji's house for administering a mixture of oil and quinine; however, now they were only hugged with concern for their safety. Hereafter, the readers understand the relation between Roopchand and Abba's family, who were close friends and neighbors, along with Roopchand being their family doctor. Their relationship spanned over generations; hence, no one had an inkling that the partition of the country would affect their harmony as well. There were political brawls and discussions within the family, but none so harmful as to ruin their relationship. This was also the time when the matter of the formation of the Muslim majority Pakistan was nothing but a matter of jokes and whims, so much so that Abba and Roopchand would make plans for United Asia. On the other hand, there were Amma and Chachi, as well as their daughters-in-law, who had their own concerns to discuss. Besides this, even the slightest of ailments, such as a cough or a sneeze, would result in the immediate calling of Doctor Saheb, who was Roopchand, who used to arrive with his grandsons and even have lunch with them as all the members of Abba's family went through checkups one by one without any need whatsoever. Roopchand was also the doctor who had helped in the delivery of children in the neighborhood. By the time Abba was paralyzed, Roopchand had retired, and his medical practices were limited to their own household and Abba's. Even when the latter passed away, the doctor took the responsibility of the household as his own and helped the family through different hardships.

All of these acts, whether big or small, symbolize the close relationship and the bonding between the two families who belonged to two different religions, the main aspect behind India's division. The scene is immediately cut short after this, and time shifts from the memories of the narrator of the past to the present reality wherein, after the fight with Roopchand's children, Chabba had returned home and celebrated as "mard-i-ghazi" (Chughtai 2018, 291), having been victorious in his battle. This episode holds an important key to the violence meted out during partition: the direct linking of nationalism with masculinity and the redefining of the same within patriarchal codes that would henceforth result in a range of gendered violence and atrocities.

It is important to note here that the narrator, Amma, had remained silent 'as she had been from the fifteenth of August when the tricolor was hoisted on the roof of Doctor Saheb's house and the Muslim League flag on ours...' (Chughtai 2018, 297), a symbol of how she saw this 'victory' of Chabba as the first step towards 'the gradual destruction of all inherited senses of community' (Pandey 2007).

Consequently, the very next scene is that of Abba's Muslim family deciding to pack their bags to leave the place and seek shelter with their 'own' religious majority in Pakistan. However, Amma refused to be a part of this madness and expressed her firm desire to stay where she was. When the immediate response to her wishes was her lack of awareness and ignorance towards the mass murders, due to her age and senility, the narratorial voice interferes, stating that had she a sharp tongue, then she would have immediately responded, "What's this strange bird called 'our land'?" Tell me, where's that land? This is the place where one was born, one grew up in body and mind. If this cannot be one's own land, then how can the place where one simply goes and settles down for a couple of days be one's own' (Chugtai 2018, 207). She expressed fear that she might have to move out of that land too.

Urvashi Butalia (1998), in *The Other Side of Silence*, had recorded the lives of real Partition victims, wherein she pointed out that for Punjabis, an extremely emotive word exists called '*watan*' that roughly translates to home, land, and country together. Hence, when they use the term '*watan*,' they refer to something inexpressible: a longing for a place, belongingness, and rootedness. Therefore, for Punjabis who were displaced as a result of Partition, their *watan* lay in the home they left behind. Amma's words resonate with the feelings of individuals who knew of no other 'homeland' than the one they resided in for all their lives and refused to bow down to people who had no care towards their emotions, caught up in their own games of power. The description of her physical attributes in the next few lines, wherein it is mentioned that she looked even more aged and weary than she was, evokes the sorrow, stress, and feelings of loss that she was facing. Her longing look with tears at her own house and Roopchand's verandah turns her into a symbolic figure of a bygone era that did not have a concept of the 'other,' an exclusive identity created during partition. Amma's family had left her to take refuge in the 'hopes' of a new land, as the readers witness Roopchand again entering into this desolate house wherein the lone woman was left to fend for herself. This scene further portrays how the Indian partition did not only destroy communities but also created a void in understanding within the different generations belonging to one family.

Hereafter, the readers witness a shift from the external reality to the inner world of women through Amma's memories. The emphatic portrayal of the house wherein she was married, where she gave birth to her ten children, who had selfishly left her for "four seers a rupee," and wherein other women touched her as a custom so that their own wombs would not remain barren, now remained empty. The scenario is important because the space of the child-birthing room, in traditional societies such as India, is considered a female-only space,

with women having the power to make decisions regarding their children. This is supported by an experimental analysis made by Maija-Riitta Jouhki, Tarja Suominen, and Päivi Åstedt-Kurki (2017), wherein they have described how giving birth at home enabled them to make decisions about birthing and about their body. Hence it does not come as a surprise that these experiences are etched in Amma's memories, because childbirth had changed her very identity from a woman to a mother, an identity that was now suffering due to her children having left her. This terrifies her, and she quickly moves on to the next room. Herein, she remembers the death of her husband after having spent fifty years of her life together in happiness with him. She mentions how fortunate he was to have been surrounded by his entire family when he passed, while she is now left desolate.

Bishnupriya Ghosh commented that women 'often find themselves in contextually marginal positions which distance them from investments in national interests and enable them to critique or interrogate both conceptions of nation and the power of the nation-state' (Ghosh 2019, 135). By bringing Amma's voice to the forefront and exposing her thoughts and desires, Chughtai subverts the traditional narrative of partition literature that places women only as victims and sheds light on the rich inner world of women that asks, 'How can anyone divide a memory?' (Ghosh 2019, 272).

Amma's words therefore critically assert a non-nationalist belonging, located in the everyday, and serve to reflect a woman's inner turmoil, a woman who had become a refugee in her own homeland. This assertion parallels the real-life condition of thousands of refugees across the world and may be depicted through the words of a Pandit female refugee from Kashmir to her son, who was forced to leave her home. 'Today I am leaving the security of my house and don't know where I am going... I cannot pack my memories. Why am I being forced to leave my homeland? I have not committed any crime. Why am I paying the price for the mistakes of others (Daiya 2008, 205)?" Both of these narratives, although not related to the same time and space, draw a similarity to the tragedy of refugees by dissolving the boundaries between fiction and reality and point to the loss of identities as a mother and as a wife and, furthermore, as an individual who could not cope with this dissection of their 'self,' leading them to be further marginalized under the prevailing circumstances.

In the story, immediately after this, the scenario shifts to Roopchand's house, wherein Roopchand could be seen restlessly walking on his verandah and letting out his frustration upon his entire family, his neighbors, the government, and even the silence of his

environment. The emotive upheaval going on in his mind reflects the condition of the common man who was unable to change his circumstances, again highlighting the chain of events that were beyond his control yet decided upon his fate. The narrator states, ‘He was wrenching out the things that were deeply entrenched in his very existence, like roots, but felt as though his flesh would come off his body with them’ (Chughtai 2018, 303). The separation of Abba’s family and the latter’s departure from the land where they had spent generations together was equivalent to the separation of his own identity, an identity that was derived from his friend’s family.

Conclusion:

Ismat Chughtai’s *Roots* is a story that sidelines itself from the horrors perpetrated by two major religious groups upon one another during the Indian partition and thus resists the dichotomy created during the same that showed forth the men as the perpetrators and the women as the victims. Through Roopchand, who did not lose his sense of responsibility to his ‘extended family,’ and through Amma, who constantly resisted the separatist politics, the short story serves as a testament to the precarious condition of individuals who hopelessly witnessed their roots being pulled apart during the partition without any capacity or power to stop it nor having any knowledge regarding how to replant oneself in a so-called new nation carved out of their ‘home’ country, all in the name of independence. But it is important to remember that Chughtai’s narrative does not limit itself to only the Indian partition, as the voices of her characters resonate with refugees around the world, forced to leave their homeland and settle in a place that they never quite ‘fit’ into. *Roots* thus serves as a timeless narrative seeking to evoke the reader’s humanitarian self and portray the tragedy of individuals caught in the mesh of nationalist agendas and border crises.

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