

Critical analysis of the oral testimony of maya rani on the partition of india es...



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The partition of India in 1948 led to one of the largest mass migration movements in the world. The successful attainment of independence from colonial rule is also a narrative of religious nationalism, displacement and communal violence between the two nation states of India and Pakistan or more definitively the Muslims and Hindus.

In Urvashi Butalia's (2000, pp. 264-300) "The Other Side of Silence" the oral testimony of Maya Rani, a Punjabi woman who was a child living in Pakistan during the Partition is particularly important to the historiography surrounding the event as it is told from a different perspective by a person not directly involved in the conflict that the emergence and independence of the nation caused. Maya Rani comes from a lineage of Harijans who are one of the minority groups in India.

The Harijans were also affected by the Partition although their involvement in it was somewhat limited as the strife was for the most part between Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. Her testimony matters as the events that unfolded during and after the Partition as well as public sentiment of the escalating horrific and violent turn of events are seen through different eyes from a position of caste as well as of a child with lower stature in society.

The testimony itself documents the upheaval and movement of mass amounts of people especially the movement and treatment of Muslims and Hindus and the religious nationalism that lead to the feeling of detachment on Maya Rani's part of the events that happened. The author's experience of the Partition was a relatively good one as she came out of it unscathed as she mentions in her narrative "Because we are Harijans, whether it had

become Pakistan or Hindustan it made no difference to us” (Butalia, 2000, p. 270).

As a child she looted the homes of those who had fled or were persecuted and as a result of the looting she and her friends were able to make their dowries for their weddings. The key points in the narrative of the document are the senseless killings that she witnesses such as the Muslim family being burnt alive in their truck, the rape and abduction of a woman, the looting of homes, migration, corrupt officials, killing and cutting up of girls and even the suicide of a young girl who would die to save her honour.

Her experience is reminiscent of the communal experience of the Partition by the population during the period of 1947-1952. The young girl’s suicide has a strong link to the event in Thoa Khalsa where close to a hundred women drowned themselves by jumping into a well supposedly ‘ preferring’ death rather than being ‘ dishonoured’ by the men from the opposing side. She relates the events in a somewhat cool and detached demeanour as if it had nothing to do with the particular bubble which was her life.

Maya Rani then comments that little over a year after the Partition she got married “ and then completely forgot about Pakistan” (Butalia, 2000, p. 267). However, how much of that which she did not elaborate on or ‘ forgot’ is because of the imagined community’s sense of nationhood and the unspoken agreement of communal silence on the issue of the abuse of women’s rights, rape and the abduction and ‘ recovery’ of women across borders during and after the Partition.

From her point of view the whole process of hatred and ethnic cleansing was instigated by the English, by troublemakers who wanted ‘ blood up to the knees’ to show that “ we were incapable of ruling so that the English would have a chance to come back” (Butalia, 2000, p. 271). This correlates to the ‘ high politics’ of the time as D’Costa (2012, p. 53) suggests that the state and the political elite used Pakistan as a bargaining chip over who would rule the territory of British India making the split between a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India a pawn in the game over territorial expansion and rule.

The oral narrative provided by Maya Rani provides a different and extremely important perspective on history although the limitations of oral history is immediately apparent as for one thing there is no way to verify the accuracy of the narrative as well as in the case of Maya Rani, the testimony was taken almost forty years after the event had happened. It would be difficult to tell if the person was remembering the actual experiences or the communal view of them that has been reinforced after years of nation building and ‘ imagined’ history.

The advantages of oral history far outweigh the limitations in the sense that it has helped bridge the divide in gendered narrative of historiography by providing a more detailed experience that “ traditional history would have ignored or even dismissed, to appreciate the issues as they appeared to the actors at the time, and set their responses against the backdrop of that understanding” (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 14). Oral testimony can offer a glimpse into the quality of life and fill the void on the emotions and experiences of the event that traditional textual sources cannot provide.

Another advantage of oral testimony is the ability it gives present feminist historiographers on the quality of lives of women as they were often illiterate (less documented experiences) and excluded from public life and ergo history. In conclusion, Maya Rani's account of the Partition of India is seen as a crucial glimpse into the social, economic and political status of the nation at a crucial, chaotic time of independence from colonialisation.

The division of land and territory using a religious nationalism approach due to a clash in ideologies. The importance of her oral testimony to history from a gendered, female, child, caste perspective is severely underrated as the actions of a nation through her eyes (and other oral histories) are paramount to understanding the emotions, reasoning and social human logic behind the events that unfolded on the ground as more than just facts, dates and statistics on a piece of paper.