

Shattered Lives, Unbroken Spirits: Women's Resilience and Recovery in Lalithambika Antharjanam's "A Leaf in the Storm" and Manik Bandopadhyay's "The Final Solution"

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Abstract:

It is a well-known fact that the Partition of India in 1947 was one of the darkest periods of the history of the Indian subcontinent. Driven by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's Two-Nation theory, the Partition of India into India and Pakistan happened, giving birth to the displacement of millions of people and intense communal riots. Not only did a significant portion of the populace in both the states of Punjab and Bengal lose their homesteads, but they also had to endure pervasive violence—physical, psychological, and financial—through and through. When discussing the Partition and its associated violence, the rampant robbery, theft, kidnapping, rape, and murder inflicted upon men, women, and children become apparent, evoking a deep sense of melancholy. Ostensibly, the violence against women somewhat differs from that against male entities. While violence against males refers to mutilation and culminates in murder; women frequently face additional horrors, including rape, mutilation, illegitimate pregnancy, social rejection, and enduring psychological trauma if they are left alive. The violence against women in the context of Partition bears no exception. But needless to say, recovery from trauma and resistance against violence have happened both in real life and in the writings of Manik Bandopadhyay and Lalithambika Antharjanam. The paper aims to delve into the acute horrors of Partition as well as the profound psychological trauma and physical violence administered upon women, exploring their journey of recovery and resistance against dominant authority in real life as well as in fictions like Lalithambika Antharjanam's "A Leaf in the Storm" and Manik Bandopadhyay's "The Final Solution".

Keywords: Partition, Recovery, Resistance, Trauma, Violence, Women

1. Introduction:

The 1947 Partition of India was a watershed moment with dual significance. While it heralded the dawn of independence and the promise of a brighter future for the newly formed nations, it simultaneously etched a traumatic chapter in the history of independent India as well as East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (now Pakistan). For those who directly experienced the upheaval of Partition and forced migration, the event left indelible scars, replacing any potential nostalgia with painful memories of loss and displacement. The dichotomy presents the Partition as both a harbinger of hope and a source of enduring trauma, especially for those who bore its immediate and severe consequences. The Partition of India led to the dissolution of British India and the creation of two distinct sovereign states: India and

Pakistan. The division resulted in India emerging as a nation with a Hindu majority, while, on the other hand, Pakistan was established as a country with a predominantly Muslim population. The event marked the end of British rule and the creation of two sovereign states: the Dominion of Pakistan, a country whose west part later became the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the east part that later became the People's Republic of Bangladesh. And the other part came out as the Union of India, a country that later became the Republic of India. The Two-Nation Theory, proposed by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and later championed by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, is considered to be the foundational basis for the Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947. The article "The Journey Of The Two-Nation Theory: From A Rights Demand To An Exclusivist Narrative", written by Muhammad Khudadad Chattha and published in *Naya Daur* newspaper, brings out the motivation behind the promotion of the Two-Nation theory. The theory posits that Muslims and Hindus in South Asia are two distinct nations with incompatible religions, cultural practices, and lifestyles, necessitating the creation of separate states. The concept of Muslims and Hindus as distinct religions based on their lifestyle can be traced back to early observations by thinkers like Al-Biruni in the 10th century. However, the idea of religious and cultural distinction as the basis for separate nations gained significant momentum in the 19th century through the writings and advocacy of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. He articulated this idea following the Hindi-Urdu controversy of 1900, where Urdu, predominantly spoken by Muslims, was replaced by Hindi for official use, leading to fears of Hindu domination among Muslims. Sir Syed's thoughts, though not initially advocating for a separate country, laid the foundation for the theory by highlighting the cultural and religious differences and the lack of protection for Muslim rights in a Hindu-majority India. This idea transformed into a political movement in the early 20th century, especially after the 1937 provincial elections because the Congress government started using Hindu symbols and policies, which nothing but enraged Muslim population. The theory outlined two potential futures for Muslims in the context of post-colonial India. The first scenario suggested that Muslim-majority provinces should remain a part of India but could have the right to secede as it was an attempt to prevent possible Hindu domination and discrimination. The second scenario hinted that Muslim-populated provinces would create a different country, which would cause population shifts. This second scenario became a reality in the year 1947 with the formation of Pakistan. What started as a marginal discourse was soon spearheaded by the Two-Nation Theory resulting in the steep growth of the All India Muslim League and the call for Pakistan. The violence and the subsequent Partition made the theory one of the key components of the history of Pakistan, focusing on the differences between Muslims and Hindus as nations. In the long term, this theory has shaped Pakistan's identity, history, and social structure significantly; minorities' rights have often been marginalised, and an 'us (Muslims) against them' attitude has frequently emerged (Chattha) [4].

When it comes to talking about Partition, an interconnectedness can be found within Partition and migration. Trauma, on the other hand, appears as a by-product. Urvashi Butalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence* has mentioned that political Partition of India in 1947 triggered one of the most significant human upheavals in history. Never before or since have so many people been forced to leave their homes and countries so rapidly. Within just a few months, approximately 12 million individuals relocated between the newly formed, divided, India and two wings of newly established Pakistan, East and West. The majority of these refugees—more than ten million—crossed the western border dividing the state of Punjab, with Muslims moving west to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs heading east to India. The migration was often accompanied by violence, and in many cases, it was the cause of it. Countless individuals succumbed to malnutrition and contagious diseases. Casualty figures vary widely, with British sources at

the time citing 200,000 deaths, while later Indian estimates reach as high as 2 million. Most historians now generally accept a toll of around 1 million lives lost. The human cost extended beyond fatalities. Sexual violence was rampant, with an estimated 75,000 women falling victim to abduction and rape, perpetuated by men from different religious communities and sometimes even their own. The social and economic fabric of the region was shattered, as families were forcibly separated, homes demolished, agricultural production disrupted with crops abandoned in fields, and entire villages left deserted. Needless to say, despite numerous warnings, the new governments of India and Pakistan were unprepared for this massive upheaval. They failed to foresee that the fear and uncertainty generated by borders drawn based on religious demographics — counting Hindus versus Muslims — would compel people to seek refuge in areas where they felt safer, surrounded by their own community. Refugees travelled by various means — buses, cars, trains, but predominantly on foot, in massive columns known as *kafilas*, which could stretch for miles. The largest of these columns, reportedly consisting of nearly 400,000 people travelling east to India from western Punjab, took up to eight days to pass a given point along their route (3-4) [3].

The division of Bengal, too, reflected immense violence, perhaps even more so. The refugee camps, which appeared as a temporary "solution", starkly highlight the unpreparedness of the contemporary Indian government. Madhuparna Mitra Guha, in her paper "Partition and the Saga of Uprooted Women in West Bengal: A Review", has talked about the Partition of India, the migration crisis, and the horrors experienced by the people of Bengal. According to her, the Partition of India in 1947 is still regarded as the largest human migration the world has ever witnessed. During the upheaval surrounding the Partition, women, more than men, became frequent targets of violence. Forced marriages, intimidation, rape, and abduction were rampant, particularly against Hindu minority women. Refugee women were subjected to humiliation by Pakistani customs officers as they travelled to West Bengal. Thousands of women fled their homes overnight to protect their honour and dignity, carrying only minimal belongings. Contemporary newspapers like *Amrita Bazar Patrika* documented the arduous journey of these women. Streams of women, clutching their babies and small belongings, were seen walking along rail tracks, with many dying en route. Between August 1946 and December 1947, millions of Hindus migrated to West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura, profoundly altering the socio-economic landscape of these regions. The Partition of Bengal into East and West not only led to the loss of thousands of lives but also uprooted millions from their homes. The displaced refugees struggled to rebuild their lives amid immense hardships and new environments. For example, migrants from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) villages struggled to adapt to life in the bustling city of Calcutta. Transit rehabilitation camps, reminiscent of concentration camps in Europe, provided dire living conditions but were still preferable to the horrors of living on railway platforms. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* described Sealdah station as a "Gateway to Hell," teeming with suffering refugees. The history of Partition is filled with violence, including forced marriages, abductions, and conversions, particularly in areas like Noakhali. Women often witnessed the brutal murder of their husbands and had their marital symbols forcibly removed. Reports from newspapers like the *Hindustan Standard* highlighted widespread sexual violence, with hundreds of women being raped. The paramilitary forces, such as the Ansars (considered to be an auxiliary force tasked with maintaining internal security and enforcing law in East Pakistan), incited this violence. At locations like Kurmitala airport and Darshana station, migrants, including women and children, were attacked, looted, and robbed. Women faced the grim choice between martyrdom and violation of their honour. The psychological and physical violence experienced by Hindu refugees from East Pakistan made it impossible for them to stay in their homeland. The journey to a new destination was perilous, especially for refugee women, who

travelled on overcrowded steamers, trains, and on foot, often through jungle areas, with minimal belongings. The mass movement left vulnerable groups, particularly women and children, at significant risk of facing abduction, rape, murder, forced marriage, or prostitution. Violence wasn't always overt; psychological fear was pervasive. Memoirs and narratives from East Bengal (then East Pakistan and now Bangladesh) refugees recount these harrowing experiences, highlighting Hindu refugees' determination to find safety in India. Many women chose suicide over the horrors they faced, profoundly impacting their lives and driving them to seek safety and dignity in a new land (153-56) [6].

In literature, many prolific writers like Lalithambika Antharjanam and Manik Bandopadhyay have made significant efforts to capture the essence of violence, and it appears they have done so successfully. Their short stories "A Leaf in the Storm" and "The Final Solution", respectively, provide vivid and poignant portrayals of the brutal realities experienced by a lot of women. In the subsequent parts of this paper the focus will be on the short stories written by these writers, analysing how they depict violence and the impact it has on individuals and communities. By delving into their narratives, the aim of the paper would be to understand the techniques and profundity they employed to convey the harsh truths of their times and the resilience of those who lived through such ordeals.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology:

This analysis specifically uses feminist literary criticism to explore Lalithambika Antharjanam's "A Leaf in the Storm" and Manik Bandopadhyay's "The Final Solution", focusing on women's condition and representation during the Partition. Feminism emerged as both a social and political movement dedicated to achieving gender equality and fairness across all aspects of life, including social, economic, and political realms. Grounded in social theories, political activism, and ethical principles, feminism seeks to eliminate sexism, exploitation, and oppression, striving to ensure that everyone has equal rights and opportunities. When discussing feminist literary criticism, it is important to recognize the significant contributions of writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, and Simone de Beauvoir. Feminist literary criticism is a broad term that lacks a precise definition but encompasses various activities in literary studies. According to Annette Kolodny, these activities include criticism written by women on any subject; criticism by women of men's books from a feminist or political perspective; and criticism by women of books written by female authors or about women in general (Kolodny 75) [5]. With this in mind, the paper majoritarily draws on female-authored writings to support its argument and to examine the notion of femininity in the context of violence. These approaches help define how female characters are portrayed and reveal sexist biases or stereotypical depictions of women's roles in society within literary texts. The approach highlights how the stories address female experiences of violence, displacement, and social stigma, offering a gendered perspective often missing from male-centric historical narratives. It examines female agency and resistance, noting how protagonists assert their autonomy amidst oppression. The analysis critiques dominating male entities perpetuating violence over vulnerable womenfolk in much chaotic circumstances like Partition and mass migration. The female body is explored as a site of political conflict and liberation, while narrative techniques are analysed for their role in voicing marginalised experiences. The portrayal of motherhood and reproductive choices in "A Leaf in the Storm" and the depiction of the sole breadwinner's condition as well as emancipation in "The Final Solution" highlight both oppressive and empowering aspects. Overall, the analysis aims to provide a gendered understanding of Partition history and shed light on women's complex experiences of trauma and recovery during this period. This research adopts a qualitative approach to explore the themes of Partition trauma and women's recovery in

Lalithambika Antharjanam's "A Leaf in the Storm" and Manik Bandopadhyay's "The Final Solution". Through close textual analysis, the paper examines language, narrative structure, and character development to understand how trauma and agency are represented in the female protagonists. The study also investigates the historical and socio-political context of the Partition, drawing on both primary literary texts and secondary sources such as newspaper articles and research papers. A feminist literary framework guides the analysis, focusing on women's resistance to patriarchy and the intersection of gender and violence, as well as the ways in which female characters navigate recovery and resilience amidst displacement and repression. Needless to say, the research employs a comparative and intertextual approach, analysing how both stories reflect and respond to the shared experiences of Partition, migration, and trauma. The ultimate aim of this paper is to pay tribute to the courageous women of India who endured and overcame the horrors of Partition and migration, reclaiming their dignity and agency against overwhelming odds.

3. Research Objective:

This research paper seeks to critically examine the intersection of gender, violence, and resilience during the Partition of India in 1947 through a comparative analysis of Lalithambika Antharjanam's "A Leaf in the Storm" and Manik Bandopadhyay's "The Final Solution." The study endeavours to explore how these literary texts articulate the gendered dimensions of trauma, oppression, and survival faced by women in the wake of real displacement and communal conflict. Employing a feminist literary critical framework, the paper aims to:

- Investigate the portrayal of female protagonists' confrontation with and resistance to patriarchal structures and socio-political violence.
- Examine the distinct modalities of agency and recovery—radical resistance through violence in "The Final Solution" and transformative acceptance and restoration of dignity in "A Leaf in the Storm."
- Contextualise these narratives within the larger socio-historical realities of Partition, thereby contributing to an understanding of women's marginalised experiences and strategies of survival.
- Bridge the domains of literary analysis and historical discourse to foreground the often-overlooked voices of women survivors of Partition and migration.

The overarching objective of the study is to illuminate the complex ways in which women negotiated autonomy and reclaimed their identities amidst extreme adversity. In doing so, this paper aspires to contribute to Partition studies by documenting and celebrating the courage and resilience of women whose stories remain emblematic of survival against overwhelming uncertainties both in real life and in fictions.

4. "The Final Solution": Reclaiming Agency through Confronting Violence with Violence

Written in Bengali, Manik Bandopadhyay's Bengali short story *Upaye* or "The Final Solution" talks about a poor family of the female protagonist, Mallika who migrated to the newly-formed West Bengal at the time of Partition of India. The short story gained worldwide popularity after its translation into English by Rani Roy. The translated text got a place in editor and translator Debajani Sengupta's edited volume, *Map Making: Partition Stories from Two Bengals* (2011). The short story takes place over a single day and focuses on a refugee family living on a railway platform after the Partition of India. The short story is set in the aftermath of the 1947 Partition of India. The family, portrayed here, consists of Mallika, her husband Bhushan, their widowed sister-in-law Asha, and their 2.5-year-old son Khokan. The family, along with many other refugees, is found living in extremely poor conditions. They occupy a small space on the

platform, with nothing more than a single mattress to share: “Mallika’s family had a place, the length of a spread mattress” (Bandopadhyay 19) [2]. As the story progresses, the narrative reveals a man named Pramatha, described as a pimp and opportunist, who offers to help Mallika by providing her family with food and shelter. However, his true intention was to lure Mallika into prostitution, exploiting her vulnerability under the guise of support. With her husband being ill, Mallika had nothing to do but take on the role of the breadwinner of the family. Desperate to feed her family, Mallika is initially shown agreeing to sacrifice her own dignity and accompany Pramatha, driven by desperation and the hope of securing some relief for her family. The climax of the short story occurs when Mallika realises that Pramatha intends to sexually exploit Mallika himself in the first place. In a moment of anger and self-preservation, Mallika strikes Pramatha with a whiskey bottle and then strangles him to death. What is noteworthy in this short story is the restoration of female agency. During Partition, the exploitation of women’s bodies and autonomy shattered all boundaries, reflecting a violent reaction to the dehumanising effects of the time. This act can be considered as a step towards emancipation for Mallika. By killing Pramatha, she frees herself from the patriarchal and economic systems that sought to exploit her. The writer, Manik Bandopadhyay, presents this as Mallika’s ‘final solution’ to her desperate situation, symbolising a radical rejection of her commodification and a reclaiming of her agency. The short story critiques the dehumanizing effects of Partition, the exploitation of refugees (especially women), and the failures of social and governmental systems to protect the vulnerable population. It also explores themes of women empowerment, the breakdown of ethical norms in extreme circumstances, and the desperate measures people may take when pushed to their limits. Mallika’s character may be read as a fictional embodiment of countless refugee women who, abandoned by social structures and exploited by patriarchal forces, were compelled to take drastic measures to survive. Her narrative stands as a powerful representation of the real-life resilience shown by Partition-era women in the face of systemic injustice.

5. “A Leaf in the Storm”: Resisting Violence, Restoring Agency

“A Leaf in the Storm” is a short story written in Malayalam by the Malayali female writer Lalithambika Antharjanam in 1948. The original Malayalam title of the short story is *Kodumkaattipetta Orila*. The short story is translated by Narayan Chandran and appears in the book *Partition Literature: An Anthology*, edited by Debjani Sengupta in 2018. Set during the 1947 Partition of India, this short story focuses on a young Sikh woman named Jyotirmoyi Devpal aka Jyoti. The story opens with Jyoti, among other women forcibly “reclaimed” from Pakistan, being transported across the border to a refugee camp in East Punjab, India. Her reluctance is palpable, as she becomes a part of a grim exchange system that treats women as objects to be traded. Jyoti’s background is that of a college-educated, independent woman from a prosperous Punjabi family. She had feminist ideals she harboured within and wanted to work for women’s emancipation. However, her current situation appears to be drastically different from her idealised situation. Jyoti has been raped and impregnated by men from the rival Muslim community during the communal violence of Partition. She is portrayed as traumatised, overwhelmed with anger and shame. As the short story progresses, Jyoti is shown to be in an extremely distressed mental state regarding her pregnancy. She even expresses a desire to end both her unborn child’s life and her own, reflecting the depth of her psychological suffering: “My life ... doctor ... may I ask you something? Tell me, are you able to destroy something which must be destroyed, just as much as you can preserve something you think must be preserved? Now this life bred of damnation—conceived in consequence of inhuman rape and ignorance—tell me doctor, can you destroy this, save another life...? Can you do that?” (Antharjanam 57)

[1]. She blames political leaders for the situation that has led to such widespread suffering. At the refugee camp, Jyoti is depicted as withdrawn and uncommunicative, choosing to keep to herself and avoid interaction with others. She is shown coping with her trauma in solitude, isolated in her pain and shame. As Jyoti goes into labour, she finds herself alone in the lap of nature. She is found to be clinging to a large tree for support during her contractions. The author uses many metaphors related to nature and images throughout the short story, comparing Jyoti to 'a leaf in the storm' and her baby to a bird. The use of nature imagery plays a significant role in the narrative. Through the process of giving birth alone in nature, Jyoti undergoes a spiritual as well as emotional transformation. By the end of her ordeal, Jyoti, who had struggled with conflicting emotions about her newly-born child, ultimately accepts the baby by seeing it not as a reminder of violence but as an innocent and natural part of life. She develops maternal feelings and decides to keep the child. What is noteworthy about Jyoti's acceptance of her child is her way of resistance. Jyoti restores her agency by choosing not to carry forward the violence she experienced to counter the violence she faced. Instead of committing further violence, she breaks the cycle by accepting the child she once saw as a curse. The short story, undoubtedly, explores themes of trauma, recovery, motherhood, and the connection between women and nature. It portrays Jyoti's odyssey from despair to rebellion against violence, culminating in her acceptance rather than perpetuating the harm she endured, especially in the case of the child she once viewed as an anathema. Jyoti's story represents not just a personal transformation but echoes the experiences of numerous real-life women who, despite enduring extreme violence, chose to reclaim their humanity through acts of maternal and emotional strength. Her journey symbolises the quiet yet radical resistance of many unnamed survivors of Partition.

6. Conclusion:

The examination of Lalithambika Antharjanam's "A Leaf in the Storm" and Manik Bandyopadhyay's "The Final Solution" highlights the resilience and recovery of women amidst the violence of the Partition of India as well as the migration crisis. Both stories depict female protagonists who endure profound trauma, physical and psychological violence, respectively, yet each navigates her path to reclaim agency in distinct ways. In the case of "The Final Solution", Mallika's act of violence against her exploiter serves as a powerful reclamation of her agency. By killing Pramatha, she not only defends her physical autonomy but also symbolically rejects the patriarchal and economic structures that seek to commodify her. Mallika's radical action illustrates a violent yet potent form of resistance, emphasizing the extremes to which women may go to protect their dignity and assert control over their lives in the face of systematic exploitation and dehumanization. On the contrary, Lalithambika Antharjanam's "A Leaf in the Storm" offers a different type of resilience through the character Jyoti, who transforms her trauma into a source of strength. Her acceptance of her child, born out of rape, signifies a profound resistance against perpetuating the cycle of violence. By choosing life and motherhood, Jyoti reclaims her agency in a manner that defies the trauma and violence inflicted upon her, which illustrates a form of spiritual and emotional resilience. Her journey from despair to acceptance highlights the intrinsic connection between women and nature and how this bond can facilitate healing and empowerment. Together, these short stories reveal the multifaceted ways women can resist and recover from the traumas of Partition. Whether through acts of defiant violence or through transformative acceptance, the protagonists of Antharjanam's and Bandyopadhyay's narratives embody the unbroken spirit and resilience of women. Their stories serve as poignant reminders of the strength and agency women possess, even in the face of profound adversity. In the preface of *Being Hindu in Bangladesh*, a book by Avishek Biswas and Deep Halder, written in 2023, Deep Halder recounts the

harrowing experiences of his and Avishek's families during the Partition of India in 1947. Smritikana Biswas, Avishek's grandmother, witnessed horrific violence in Noakhali, including the threat of having to kill her (Smritikana's) sister by Smritikana's father to avoid detection by the murderous men. Deep and Avishek grew up with the legacy of their refugee families from East Bengal (now Bangladesh). While Deep's experience was somewhat detached, Avishek's upbringing in a refugee settlement deeply connected him to the impacts of Partition and mass migration (ix-xii) [7]. This shared history of repression and resilience significantly shaped their families, especially women, who endured violence and trauma. Even as a member of a refugee family, the author acknowledges the presence of a traumatic past deeply embedded in his familial narratives, particularly in the stories recounted by his grandmother. This paper stands as a tribute to the courageous women, known or unknown, who, despite facing various forms of violence and repression, survived and recovered from their trauma. The short stories discussed within the paper serve to honour the millions of women who endured the hardships of Partition, migration, violence, and trauma, yet ultimately found the strength to persevere and heal from those harrowing experiences.

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