



Sita Betrayed and the construction of a literary history of loss¹

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ABSTRACT:

The paper tries to understand the relationship between a literary text and a historical event. It argues that while recent critical studies often read literary text as an evidence of history; there are many ways through which a text can evade history. Through a close analysis of *Sita Betrayed*, a novel that deals with the aftermath of Partition, the essay argues for two ways in which the text can evade and exceed history. It can do so by focusing on an extremely personal loss and by alluding to multiple mythical and literary narratives. The paper argues that the text of *Sita Betrayed* creates an aesthetic experience that though constituted by its history always exceeds it.

KEYWORDS:

¹ I will like to express my gratitude towards Priya Kumar for closely reading through the draft of this paper and for giving me long copious comments. Her suggestions have contributed immensely in improving my language as well as my arguments.

Partition Literature, Excess, History, Qurratulain Hyder, Personal Loss, Mythical Narratives, Urdu literature

This paper emerges from an attempt to theorize the relationship of literature with its historical context especially pertaining to literature that has emerged from a major historical event, in this case the Partition. For the past few decades, literature has been fruitfully used by ethnographers, historians, anthropologists as an entry point into the discussion of Partition. Often in such readings the focus is on those portions of the text that explicitly deal with the historical event while other sections of the text are relatively ignored. In such readings, the text is juxtaposed with the historical accounts to read history through literature. It uses literature as an evidence to show the multiple voices and aspects of history. However, the complex relationship of a literary text to its historical context is left under-theorized. This paper would focus on the relationship of a literary text to its historical context by exploring various ways through which a literary text can evade historical specificity. The essay would argue that the intimate personal relationships of the protagonist and the mythical allusions present in *Sita Betrayed* cannot be pinned down to the historical event and thus would always be constituted as an excess. *Sita Betrayed* is a text that deals with Sita whose family migrated from Sindh to Delhi after the partition of the subcontinent. Sita has a doctorate in Sociology from Columbia University. The narrative of the text moves across countries and is interspersed with long quotations from *Mudrarakhasa* and *Ramcharitmanas*. The

narrative of the text moves around time and space to recreate the feelings of the protagonist through description of multiple places and by allusions and quotations from various literary texts.

The spatial location in *Sita Betrayed* moves from Delhi to Sindh to Sri Lanka to Paris with memories of New York interspersed throughout the text. The first section of the paper will deal with Sita's relationship with Sindh. Aijaz Ahmad writing about the Urdu fiction of a decade after the Partition states that

The sense of exile and dislocation which had accompanied Partition meant, inevitably, that the memory of what had been left behind was itself to emerge as a major preoccupation of the new narrative; not just the moment of rupture but in far greater detail the structure of what had been ruptured. (106)

The section on Sindh in *Sita Betrayed* works within the framework of this theorization as it invokes the pre-partition Sindh and the lives that had been disrupted through partition. Sita's mother tells Bilqis that "In Karachi, in the Amil colony, we had a two storied house with eighteen rooms" (47). The literal space of their dwelling has been reduced by their migration to Delhi after the Partition and, thus, evoking a memory of the past that was idyllic and better than the cramped up space in Karol Bagh. Sita is annoyed at her mother for constantly repeating the story of their magnificent house in Karachi. In Sindh, Sita has to listen to Manghli Khala being nostalgic about the loss of their Avadh identity where they owned a small estate called Chandpur. In both

instances, Sita reacts with a sense of disinterest. When Manjhi Khala refers to their estate in Avadh, Sita is reminded “of the way her mummy had talked. She felt bored”(49). While in Sindh, she refuses to go and see her old family house. In certain ways Sita is wary of the narratives of a rich idyllic past and is indifferent to the loss of home when understood at the scale of the house. Instead of her old house, the land of Sindh holds more importance for her. In her conversations with Irfan she states “Don’t you see that this is my land? My fields – my villages – my saint’s tombs?”(58).

She gives him a detailed account of the history and geography of Sindh where each *pir* or saint has both a Hindu as well as a Muslim name. She further states in the text that “the real religion of this land was Sufism, and that Sufism never let us become religious fanatics (66).” She refers to the people of Sindh as “my people” and her account of Sindh is interspersed with both the mythical past of Sindh evoked through references to *Puranas*, *Chach Nama*, the *Mahabharata* as well as to its specific pre-partition history that is evoked through her own memories of that land, the figure of Pir Allah Baksh Jamali and the inscriptions left behind in the temples by Sindhis who migrated to India.

Sita throughout her post-partition journey tries to construct a narrative about Sindh as her own land but she has to finally accept that “Sindh is not mine” (72). The familiar land has been turned into a strange place so that after days of repeatedly claiming a sense of belonging to that place she “seemed utterly alone, entirely helpless and totally a stranger” (72). The narrator later declares with a sense of finality “This

Sindh of November 1957 was very different. So different indeed that it could offer no sense of belonging to Sita Mirchandini of Karol Bagh, Delhi. (72)" She goes through a major transformation during her post-partition visit to Sindh. A land whose history, culture and language she knows so well is transformed into a strange place for her as the people who have migrated into Sindh such as Irfan have little knowledge about its culture and language while the syncretism of this province has been completely disrupted by the formation of the new Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

It is crucial here to note that Sindh appears only in the initial part of the text and then both the narrative of the novel and its protagonist move to different spaces across continents. However, before moving to other portions of the text I will like to quote a theoretical problem that Priya Kumar raises in her reading of the text.

It is my contention, however, that we do injustice to these accounts in reading them as mere 'social documents' that simply reflect the reality of Partition; my attempt, on the contrary, is to see these narratives of the Partition from a somewhat different exploratory perspective...(202)

Here is an appeal to not read literary texts as social documents, as texts that shall give us more information about the history that constituted them. One of the underlying concerns about this paper is to understand the relationship between a historical event and its fictional rendition. If fiction does not merely represent the event and its memories then what does it do in the context of a historical event like Partition. I would argue that fiction always captures an excess in our subjectivity that refuses to be defined

by the political and social events of our time. Fiction is important not because it is constituted by history but because in its moments of excellence it can turn its back upon history. It is in this refusal to bow down to the violent political events of history that fiction finds its solace. Fiction refuses to be determined by history and yet is constituted by it. It tells us about living through an event and its consequences and yet exceeds it.

In order to illustrate my point, I will quote a long speech from the novella that can arguably be considered as one of the most historically conscious and deeply political paragraph in the text. It is when Irfan tells Sita

You see, Sita, you think I'm very unsentimental. But this question of a lost home bothers me, too. In West Berlin, in Hong Kong—I have seen homeless people everywhere. In American cities I met people who had fled from Eastern Europe. In Jordan I saw the terrible plight of Palestinian refugees . . . we live in a time when four hundred million people have suddenly gone through a metamorphosis. Their thoughts, their feelings, their reactions to events—all have changed . . . He paused briefly, Now we have started talking politics again. Which I hate. (64)

This passage can give a critic an ample scope to jump into the comparative history of partitions and migrations across the world. Such a reading will tell us a lot about those historical events and little about this literary text. What is Irfan's attitude towards those events that he has described? And I think the clue lies in the last sentence when he says

that “Now we have started talking politics again. Which I hate.” What is this hate towards the larger political events? Or is it hatred towards oneself for talking about it? One has to or maybe one should talk about something else. Irfan, here even after mentioning these events is trying to have a conversation that is beyond or maybe something other than these political events. This passage expresses both an acknowledgement that one has been constituted by history and also a desire to turn away from it, to talk about something else. Like Irfan, I believe the text also has such an ambiguous attitude towards history.

By harking over personal relationships and by alluding to the mythical stories, the narrative of *Sita Betrayed* evades historical specificity in order to grasp something more profound about the loss constituted by Partition. Fiction gives you a platform to engage with social, political and historical background and yet also the flexibility to transgress them by emphasizing over a sorrow or love that is deeply personal. It does not deny that history has a role to play in that constitution instead fiction acknowledges it but stands in defiance against this constitution and takes a breath of freedom to state that one’s whole life cannot be defined by the events of history. In moments of personal love and sorrow, characters in fiction transgress the bonds of history. It is an attitude towards the historical event that challenges the fact that it can drive the whole of our existence. And I believe Sita embodies this defiant attitude towards the history of Partition.

Sita is neither Muslim nor Hindu, neither Indian nor Pakistani. She is both Hindu and Muslim and both Indian and Pakistani. Initially in the text she tells Hima that “I am not a silly Hindu” (31). Later in the text we realize that she had given up her Hindu identity to marry Jamil. So, that she is neither a Hindu nor a Muslim and both Hindu and Muslim. She occupies this liminal space in terms of her religious identity.

Unlike many other narratives of Partition, *Sita Betrayed* goes beyond the binary of India and Pakistan, the country of migration and that of origin. Sita travels across continents in search of that elusive home which remains forever deferred in the narrative. She is deeply entrenched in the mythical and pre-partition history of Sindh. However, she knows equally about the history of Sri Lanka. Her identity has been shaped through her intellectual background. The binary of India and Pakistan is too limited for a character like Sita. The whole world is open to her mind and experience. She can be at home at various places and yet she is perpetually dislocated. For Sita, home becomes a metaphor that materializes itself at various places and in various individuals. It can be found in the initial years of her marriage with Jamil, in a café in Sri Lanka or during her stay in Paris with Irfan. Home is an elusive concept, though spatially it can be located across continents; it is only momentary in nature. It can last for moments, days, months and years but it is never eternal. At the end of the narrative when she goes back to Paris, Sita states that “Home, now, was where Irfan lived” (171). Will that be her permanent home? Will the quest stop with Irfan? Will she not feel the urge to search for new home away from Sindh and Irfan? The narrative ends with the

door being banged upon her face as if visually illustrating the fact that the door to permanence has forever been shut upon her. The quiet emblem of this home is her son Rahul who stays away from her throughout the narrative. The narrative of the novella can be summed up in that song sung by the Dutch Burgher in a hotel in Colombo :

O, come along with me

To my little corner of the world

And dream a little dream

In my little corner of the world.

The story is a metaphorical search for this little corner in her huge world. For Sita, this attempt to search for that corner literally takes her across the world. And yet it remains an incomplete quest. Sita does not emerge as a representative figure of Partition literature instead it is her individual uniqueness, her intellectual background that is constantly emphasized throughout the text. It is her sexual freedom that perplexes reader to a great extent. So, that C. M. Naim in his introduction to the text writes that "Sita Mirchandani, despite betrayals from a series of men, must remain alive to her essentially felt need" (xi). This is a clear misreading of the text. It is Sita who cheats on her husband and then moves from one man to another in a series of encounters. She, like Projesh Kumar Chowdhary, is unable to stay with a single man for a long time. It is this continuous dissatisfaction that drives her throughout the narrative. She is passionate in her relationships and thus is ready to change her religion in order to marry Jamil or to leave for Paris with Irfan. Her stay in Paris and her enactment of the

role of a housewife constitutes some of the few idyllic passages in the text. Sita through her love affairs is searching for a home. Home becomes a metaphor for a lot of things. Being an intelligent, well-educated woman, home is a contract, a coming together that would give her a sense of belonging.

Partition constitutes an important element in the formation of Sita's personality but she is not defined by it. The whole narrative is underwritten by Partition but one has to read it as an attempt to overcome that mark on her life. Sita's love relationship with men, in a way, constitutes an excess that cannot be easily pinned down to the historical event. And in that sense they are the moments of hope within the text. Sita's wanderings from one place to another and from one man to another captures her individuality. This is the excess in her narrative that cannot be pinned down to the historical event of partition.

Also, the text does not want to stick back to its own moment of history. In order to define its sorrow, it does not look back to the event that caused it but to the sorrows that are found abundantly within its own world – the world of literature and myths. So, that the travels of Sita Mirchandini to Sri Lanka can be juxtaposed with the journey of that other mythical Sita into the land that lies across the sea. Crucially, the loss felt by Sita has not been explored by attempting to describe the causes and causalities of history but by going to other literary texts that convey a similar loss. The novella is given a polyphonic character and a distinct texture by incorporating long quotations from other literary texts so that it contains various narratives at multiple levels. The text

incorporates large portions from other texts within its structure so that it becomes an amalgamation of various voices across centuries expressing pain at the loss of various things in different epochs. The text of *Ramcharitmanas* appears to mythologize the condition of loss, abduction and pain. At the level of form it juxtaposes the mythical events with that of partition.

Sita is lost in the dreadful jungle of today's world. She was abducted by the Raavana's of today's world . . . You frauds, you who read the Ramayana, how many Muslim Sitas did you abduct in 1947? (135)

Through these lines a strong political statement is made against the abduction of women during Partition and this reference does not come by historically locating the story of a perpetrator or a victim of abduction but through mythology. Here the mythical has been used to make a political point without referring to the historical specificity of various abductions that happened during Partition. The mythical stories can reflect upon history but they also exceed it. As Intizar Hussian states in his interview, these myths give meaning to the event, a sense of relatability but the meaning of such myths in itself remains ambivalent and ambiguous so that it becomes difficult to pin them down to any particular historical context.

Sita Betrayed is a text that ponders on the idea of home and belonging in the context of the massive homelessness caused by Partition. However, the narrative does not restrict itself to this historical event and goes beyond it by focussing on intensely

personal relationships while also universalizing certain emotions of loss by alluding as well as quoting from multiple mythical as well as literary narratives.

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