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Our Stars have Blood Clots: Re-reading the 1947 Partition of India

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Yasmin Khan: *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2007. Pp. 251. Rs. 399. ISBN 9780143420675)

In one of her lectures entitled "Nationalism and Imagination", delivered at the University of Sofia, Bulgaria, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak remarked: "I remember Independence—I was young, but I was precocious—and it was an incredible event. But my earliest memories are of famine: skeletal bodies dying in the streets, crawling to the back door begging for starch."[i] Something of this "incredible" background is the moving spirit behind the book *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* where Yasmin Khan focuses on the catastrophic events leading to the Partition in 1947. Khan poignantly states that "there was nothing 'inevitable' about the Partition and nobody could have predicted, at the end of the Second World War, that half a million people or more were going to die." (22) Her statement clearly challenges one of the orthodox explanations of the Partition which—in compliance with Samuel Huntington's clash of civilization thesis—terms the division of territory between India and Pakistan as an "inevitable" event because two separate religious communities, Hindu and Muslim, would have failed to live in peace and harmony after the British left India. Khan meticulously disentangles various parts of the grand narrative of Independence and Partition to highlight the politics played out in New Delhi between Lord Mountbatten, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and scathingly, she charges the planning and decision-making of the leaders that resulted in over twelve million people getting displaced and several thousands killed. She personalizes the Partition by incorporating letters and interviews of those who were caught in the chaos of dispossession while their identities were being redrawn by the Radcliffe Line. In fact, Khan has explored the critical frameworks by which we can understand an event of such magnitude and trauma as the Partition from multifarious perspectives by combining the urgent and often cathartic narratives of those who were affected by the event (in direct and in generational ways) with the now superabundant discourse surrounding the event.

In the first six chapters of the book, where Khan critically analyses the role played by the British government to divide India and Pakistan, there are personal accounts of British officials

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and magistrates, assiduously gathered by her from the British records of India in Great Britain and the United States Consular accounts of India. The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters deal with the increasing mistrust among the political leadership of undivided India. To highlight this point, Khan draws on leading newspapers of the time to bring to light the confusion among political leaders as well as ordinary citizens regarding the Partition. In the last three chapters of the book, Khan often prioritizes personal narratives of individuals over political developments, and her focus is upon India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (formerly, East Pakistan). Like her predecessor, Urvashi Butalia, Khan empathizes with the human dimension of the history by tracing the lives of the people who lived through the Partition. In her study, the Partition signifies division of territory and formation of two new states along with the anguishing personal memories of loss and displacement.

Khan's strategic timeline ranges from 7th May, 1945—the day Second World War ended—to 15th December, 1950, marking the death of Vallabhai Patel, India's Deputy Prime Minister. Her maps of India and Pakistan before and after the Partition along with the map of the Radcliffe Line that divided Punjab and Bengal acquaint a reader with the geopolitical making of the Partition. Indeed, these first few pages are by themselves a valuable addition to the scholarly literature on the Partition.

In the Introduction Khan writes: "[a]mong a population of four hundred million, where the vast majority lived in the countryside...it is hardly surprising that many thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, did not hear the news for many weeks afterwards."(1) The news of the plan to divide the land into two nation-states—India and Pakistan—was disseminated by the British, with consent from the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League. Khan stresses this point to explain why it was imperative for the British to go ahead with the plan of the Partition. In the first four chapters of the book, Khan analyses how the colonial system of governance was wearing down in strength due to Britain's involvement in the Second World War. The failure of the administration to tackle the Bengal famine and the mutiny of the Royal Indian Navy prompted the British government to act fast. The British government's last significant effort came in the form of the Cabinet Mission in 1946. But the Cabinet Mission failed to reach a consensus among the political leaders. Khan speculates that had the Cabinet Mission been

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"successful...Pakistan as we know today [it] would never have come into existence."(58) Its failure not only tarnished the image of the British Empire but also signified that the colonial master had lost moral authority to govern India. The negligence of the Raj is further brought to light when Cyril Radcliffe, who had never visited India, was appointed the chairman of the Boundary Commission. The complete breakdown of the administrative service coupled with the decision of the British Parliament to withdraw their army from India meant that the communal riots could not be stopped, and the claim to peace looked increasingly slender. To expose the psychological standpoint of the Englishmen posted in India, Khan quotes from the letter of A.P. Hume, a British district magistrate stationed in Varanasi: "I observe all that is going on around as if from a distant safe place."(79) Quite unlike some of her contemporaries, Khan is unequivocal in her condemnation of the British when it came to handling the growing tension in South Asia. The claim by scholars that the British indeed wanted to hold on to India as long as possible is dismissed by Khan. The point to reckon with is that Congress leaders, as argued by historian Stanley Wolpert, had no desire to share military camps with the British Commonwealth. Hence, division of the Punjab was necessary for the British. In the era of the Cold War, Russia expressed desire to expand its territory southwards, and a common critical consensus is that Jinnah's Punjab would have provided a perfect military base for the British and the United States of America to thwart the Russian army manoeuvre. Though Khan may not agree with these views, there is ample primary evidence available in critical discussions related to the Partition which she could have taken into account before terming Britain's idea of partitioning India as "unplanned" and "hasty".

Khan, nonetheless, convincingly argues that the "hasty" and "unplanned" Partition was accorded much importance after the election of 1945. In the second chapter, she elaborates on the 1945 General Election. She believes that the declaration of the results of the election strengthened the Muslim League's demand of Pakistan. Khan cogently argues that whereas Congress wanted to prove that the party had "universal support" and "the population was, therefore, anti-Pakistan . . . every vote cast in favour of the League was a vote in favour of Pakistan." (33) Though the Congress managed to win more seats than the Muslim League, the League's success lay in its increment in vote share and seats won compared to previous elections. While revisionist historians of the Partition like Ayesha Jalal are of the opinion that

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the arrest of the Indian National Congress leadership during the Quit India Movement in 1940 provided the political ground from where the League could reach out to the mass, Khan holds the view that the Muslim League's campaign of a Hindu Raj, under the Congress, provided the necessary impetus to the League to consolidate its presence electorally. There was a steady increase in the League's membership, observes Khan. She provides statistics for this in the third chapter where she writes, "membership had rocketed from just 1,330 card-carrying Leaguers in 1927 to an official membership of two million claimed by 1944." (43)

While narrating the rise of the Muslim League which gave voice to the idea of Pakistan, Khan also critically traces the growth and development of organizations like the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) and the Hindu Mahasabha. She records how young students were skipping classes to join rallies organized by the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha. These right-wing Hindu organizations were professionalised, private militia who could go to war if asked to do so by party seniors. To counter the challenges posed by the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha, an organization called the Muslim League National Guard was formed in 1931. These organizations had decisive roles to play during the riots. Strikingly Khan notes that the "nationalistic" visions of these organizations were "flagrantly at odds with the way in which freedom was being envisioned in Delhi and London." (51) She proceeds to examine how after the riots following the declaration of the Partition, these organizations provided relief in refugee camps, thereby stepping into the shoes of the nascent government. Through such observations, Khan points to the increasing support for these religious, right-wing organizations since the days of the Partition. One understands, thus, how at present in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, such organizations, by virtue of their structural framework, readily reach out to the mass through their social welfare schemes, running almost parallel governments in towns and districts where they enjoy support.

"From start to the finish", as historian Joya Chatterji has argued, "the making of the borderline was shot through with politics."[ii] Khan seems to be in complete agreement with this statement for she narrativizes how the act of partitioning the two countries was devoid of any humanitarian appeal. The army was being divided as civil war broke out in India. Maps were being drawn with no consideration whatsoever about the importance of religious sites to the

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communities. The Sikh shrine of Nankana Sahib fell in Pakistan. Amarnath Temple fell in the disputed lands of Kashmir. And yet, as Khan poignantly puts it, the new citizenry of India and Pakistan remained poorly unaware of the gravity of the situation. For none bothered to protect the "new nations' most precious asset: their people".(127)

Confounded by the idea of Partition, ordinary citizens took up arms to defend their nation or to defend themselves. Following the Muslim League's Direct Action Day, violence broke out for the first time in Calcutta. From Calcutta, the violence spread to Noakhali and Tippera. In retaliation to the killings in Calcutta, Hindus attacked Muslim settlements in Bihar. Like a wildfire, a programme of well-planned ethnic cleansing had been implemented in eastern states of India. Soon riots broke out in Garhmukhteswar in Meerut district as well as along the coastline of Gujarat and Bombay, spreading to the United Province (present day Uttar Pradesh) and then to Punjab, Lahore, Karachi and Kashmir. In the midst of the violence, people started migrating, and the journey itself proved to be a cruel punishment for many. This mass exodus was unforeseen by the leaders who approved of the Partition. To Jinnah, the partition plan came as a "bitter pill." (90) Nehru termed the Partition "a watershed which was dividing the past from the future." (205)

Khan investigates the series of acts of violence perpetrated by the two communities underscoring the fact that the history of the Partition was a history of broken bodies and broken lives. She empathically states that "rape was used as a weapon, as a sport and as a punishment." (133) What emerges through different narratives is how women were considered as repositories of national identity and their bodies were used to demarcate possession of land and space. Women were abducted, forcefully married and kept as slaves, and families "traded their young daughters"(133) in return for a safe transit of the others. Later, many refused to take their daughters or sisters back, declaring that their character was "tainted". The problem of pregnancy, due to rape, forced many to embrace prostitution as a livelihood. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin have argued that many women who were ultimately rescued were transported to camps and fitted in roles which inculcated in them the need to be a middle-class woman.[iii] Khan interviewed one of the women working in those camps who complained about the work that she was being asked to do because she felt that such work would only help her pass the time,

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but would not get her a decent family. Echoing the ideas of Butalia who believes that the Partition can only be understood through "fiction, memoirs, testimonies, through memories, individual and collective, through the communalism that it unleashed,"[iv] Khan introduces excerpts from letters of women who as, Mahatma Gandhi stated, became "the chief sufferers" of 1947. (135)

At the end of her book, Khan looks at the account of the Partition in school books in both India and Pakistan to conclude that there remains a great gulf between the cursory readings of the "horror and suffering" scantily narrated in the texts and "the actual experiences of Partition" (202-204). One recalls Pablo Neruda's powerful image: there are blood clots in our stars, for India as well as Pakistan were formed at the high price of the Partition. Khan's book is as dramatic as it is elaborate; yet when compared to the delineations and descriptions of the incidents in Punjab and Bengal, Khan remains cryptically silent about Kashmir and the problems that gripped the state owing to the post-Partition war(s) between India and Pakistan. India's representative in the United Nations, V.K Krishna Menon, in 1957 stated that India being a residual state, retained its membership in the United Nations, whereas Pakistan, a product of the Great Partition, had to be formally admitted into the United Nations. When read in the light of this statement, Khan's subtitle of the book—*The Making of India and Pakistan*—appears to be a bit misleading. While Khan devotes necessary space to talk about the problems in India which have trickled down into the body politic of the nation due to the Partition, very little is discussed about the inability of Pakistan's political leadership to carry forward the ideals that Jinnah envisaged in his inaugural speech in Pakistan's Constituent Assembly. These are, however, minor points of criticism about a book that examines a tense, intractable period of South Asian history with great dexterity to reveal, analyse, and narrate the Partition in 1947 as a history of human suffering.

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[i] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Nationalism and the Imagination* (Calcutta, Seagull Books, 2010), p.4.

[ii] Joya Chatterji, 'The Making of a Borderline', in I. Talbot and G. Singh, eds., *Region and Partition: Bengal, Punjab and the Partition of the Subcontinent* (Oxford and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.172.

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[iii] Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998).

[iv] Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998), p.9.