

## **The Concept of 'Otherness' in Partition Narratives of Finland and India**

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### **Abstract**

*The concept of 'otherness' is something that we face every day in our lives. People define themselves by how they view others around them. This 'othering' is seen in the literatures of Finland and India: the two countries that underwent the pain of partition during the 1940's. Although they have such similar underlying events; the conflict, the social upheaval, the unavoidable losses are common threads, but the cultural differences bring variation to their literary expressions. Variations aside, people, no matter where they are, tend to label those who are different from themselves. This paper attempts to analyze some of the aspects of 'otherness' that are evident in the partition narratives of Finland and India.*

**Keywords:** otherness, other, partition, Karelia, communal, gender

The concept of 'otherness' refers to setting boundaries of acceptability in society. This idea outlines the relationship different groups have with each other. One's 'self' is defined and strengthened as it is compared to the 'other' who is considered an outsider or different. The 'other' is whatever the 'self' is not. Lisa Onbelet highlights the thought of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas: "Self cannot exist, cannot have a concept of itself as self, without the other." (Kearney as quoted by Onbelet)

Throughout history, people have labeled those who are different. People have been labeled 'other' because of their differences of religion, gender, geography, politics, colour, caste and class, et cetera. This paper attempts to highlight a few prominent forms of 'otherness' that stand out in the partition narratives of Finland and India.

Considering the partition literature of Finland and India, one recognizes 'otherness' particularly in the areas of power and national identity; communalism, and gender. This paper will take a closer look at those areas of contention in light of the cultural differences of these two countries and discuss the aspects of 'otherness' that permeated both populations. India's national identity arose from the ousted departure of the British from India while the Finns faced the threat of losing their independence to a power-hungry Soviet Union. In both instances, one unmistakably observes a strong apprehension, even hatred for the 'other'.

The pursuit for power and national identity is often ruthless and calculating. In Eeva Kilpi's biographical novel about Finland's Winter War of 1939, she describes her own thoughts as a child. The Soviet Union falsely accused Finland of having launched an artillery attack against Mainila, a Russian village on the Finnish border (34). The brazen accusation, the barefaced lie was shocking! Even small children knew about the Soviets' deceptive stratagem. The Soviet Union cancelled the Finnish-Soviet non-aggression pact, and on the basis of this fabrication, conveniently launched air, land and sea attacks on Finland. The Soviet Union wanted war. Thus The Winter War began. Just as the Soviets had falsified information to justify their attack, in a similar fashion, we observe political maneuverings for communal incitement in Bisham Sahni's *Tamas* (2001). A Muslim fundamentalist Murad Ali has paid a low caste Hindu, Nathu, to slaughter a pig. He told the Hindu man that it was for a veterinary surgeon's experiments. However, in the morning, the pig was found at the steps of the local mosque, with the purpose of inciting communal violence (3, 67). "Besides, no one seemed to know how the pig was killed and by whom. Murad Ali was the only one who knew about it and he, being a Muslim, would not tell anyone that he had got the heinous deed done" (131). As we look at India and the events of 1947, the struggle for power is evident. "The British had run India for three centuries with the byword 'Divide and Rule' (Lapierre and Collins 195).

They were shrewd in how they manipulated and ruled the country. In *Tamas*, Richard, the Deputy Commissioner, and his wife Liza discuss the cunning principle: "In the name of religion they fight one another; in the name of freedom they fight us." To which Liza replies: "In the name of freedom they fight against you, but in the name of religion you make them fight one another" (Sahni 50). Now was the time for Indian Independence. It was time to transfer the power to the Indians. However, that transfer was not easy and the reluctant British ensured that the price would be a heavy one.

Closely related to the struggle for power, as we have observed in the quick and violent rise of communalism, is the desire for national identity, or independence. This is evident in the arena of the 1947 Indian Subcontinent, as well as in the events that took place in Finland after 1939. Not only did the Finnish people fear losing their independence to the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, but they faced the palpable danger of losing their country entirely, if it would be swallowed by the Soviet Union as Stalin intended to annex it. He wanted to protect Leningrad using Finland as a buffer against a possible attack from the Germans.

The People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs V.M. Molotov had communicated to the Finnish Government, in 1940, that the Soviet Union was eager to get possession of the Finnish nickel mines in Petsamo, in North-Eastern Finland (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The Soviet government expected to receive a satisfactory answer and insisted on it. The Soviet Union desired openly to add Finland to its territory. The fear of Soviet aggression must have been the driving force in Finland's quest to protect her independence. The inevitable outcome was war. Stalin expected his army to take over Finland in two weeks. But, in reality, it took almost five years, much death and terrible destruction. It was a great loss to Finland when, despite their best efforts, the Soviet Union seized Karelia after World War II. Karelia was an area of Finland bordering the Soviet Union. Its population was approximately 11% of Finland and it was well developed and industrialized with extensive railroads and forest industry. Losing Karelia cost Finland immensely, including the nickel mines in Petsamo. It seems that the binary of 'otherness' between Finland and the Soviet Union was primarily geographical. The loss of space, the annihilation of what they knew as home, the forceful surrendering of what was uniquely theirs to another nation meant a loss of identity and to be 'othered' with them. The fear of being 'othered,' as it were, could also drive a community to seek independence to protect its ethnicity and have freedom to 'other others'. Even today, Russia is a powerful neighbor, and the fear of possible Russian invasion causes many Finns to still view Russia and the Russians as a palpable threat to their independence.

A great deal of historiography is written from the point of view of the elite. Thus, history tends to record major events and accomplishments of those in power. And today, in order to avoid the uncomfortable labeling of being 'politically incorrect,' much truth of the struggle and violence that took place is being silenced and even omitted from history. Gyanendra Pandey said in his article on "The Prose of Otherness" , that the 'historians' history' "appears singularly uninterested in the popular construction of partition as the partition of linguistic communities, villages, houses, families, the meaning of Partition for those who lived through it, the trauma it produced and the transformation that it wrought; or in its legacy of narrowness and bitterness, and the stereotyping, the memories and the sharp divisions between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs that it left behind" (205). The Indian binary of 'otherness,' in reference to the time of Independence and the subsequent Partition, was derived more from religious identities than the drive to unite against a common enemy, the Colonizers. The British were well aware of this. They realized that if the Hindus, Sikhs and the Muslims fought each other, they would be distracted enough to not realize the strength they actually possessed to oust the British.

Edward Said brought out that the Europeans divided the world into two parts, polarizing the distinction: the East and the West; the Occident and the Orient; or the civilized and the uncivilized (46). Thus, the Europeans used Orientalism to define themselves, and they considered it their duty to civilize the Orientals, the 'others'. Furthermore, the portrayal of the 'native' by the Colonisers is usually from the Western point of view. Gyanendra Pandey, in his "The Prose of Otherness," brought out that "British colonialism in India regularly represented the 'native' as the primitive other, and violence - and, at other times, its exact opposite, complete passivity - as his history" (195). After the British left, the nationalists in India continued the idea of 'otherness' in their own way. Pandey continues to say that "Indian nationalism in its turn represented certain kinds of violence, and most kinds of mass violence, as the work of the 'backward'— people who were unfortunately ill-educated and insufficiently enlightened. It is my contention that historians' history has maintained this tradition, especially in respect of sectarian or ethnic violence" (195).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to highlight not only the binary opposition of 'the European' versus the 'Oriental Other', but also the 'otherness' perpetuated by the 'Divide and Rule' principle employed by the British. That well-planned strategy drove the nation further into communal conflict which devastated millions. Lapierre and Collins suggested that it was this principle which helped drive an ever-widening, unfortunately lasting, religious wedge between the Hindus and Sikhs and the Muslims before, during, and after Partition (8). As a result, many of villages in the North were ravaged by communal violence. While communal conflict was mounting, the country was being divided by the two main political parties: the Congress and the Muslim League. "Unanticipated even by its own standards, Congress's victory in the 1937 elections went beyond all expectations. ... There was no space here for Jinnah and the League." Thus, "Inequality in the terms of representation could hardly ensure equality of citizenship" (Bose and Jalal 149, 151). Hence, there were endless debates between Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Vallabhbhai Patel about the future leadership of the country after the Independence, resulting in the Partition of India into two separate countries: an amputated India and the new born Pakistan.

In the beginning, before the Independence and the Partition, people's relationships were hinged on protective instinct and an abiding sense of community. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India, A Novel* (1991) shows how villagers often swore to keep their neighbours safe in the face of violent mobs of their own community. For example, Imam-Din, the Muslim cook said "As long as our Sikh brothers are with us, what have we to fear? ... I think you are right, brothers, the madness will not infect the villages" (65). The cook continues, "I am prepared to take an oath on the Holy Koran," declares the Chaudhry, 'that every man in this village will guard his Sikh brothers with no regard for his own life! We have no need for oaths and such,' says the mullah in a fragile elderly voice'. Brothers don't require oaths to fulfill their duty" (65). Yet, practically overnight, people who had known each other for generations had their best intentions turn into hateful violence.

Among Finns, Russians have been the 'other' since 1917 when Finland declared her independence from the Soviet Union. Their dislike was manifested mostly verbally. The Russian became to be known by the term *ryssä*, 'the Ruskie'. It is a Finnish term which refers to those of the Soviet Union in a negative and derogatory light and it has permeated the collective mentality of the whole country. There developed a *ryssäviha*, a deep hatred of the of the Ruskie, in fact, of anything remotely Russian. Eeva Kilpi, in her biography, continues to describe her experiences as a child in the war-torn Karelia: "Words 'Germany,' 'Europe' and *ryssä* repeat often when adults speak... *Ryssä* will take it anyway.... When *ryssä* begins to approach we'll lose all of Finland." Children learned from the adults the meaning of *ryssä* and the abhorred threat that name communicated (17, 20).

The verbal labeling in Finland was not limited to Russians. Another feature of the 'other' in Finland was the community of Karelians. Finns hated the Russians, now they began to dislike Karelians due to ignorance and apprehension toward that which is different. Ironically, it was the Karelians who were evicted from their homes and farms. They were the ones doubly wronged and who had to flee Karelia as refugees and move deeper into Finland, away from the front lines. Almost half a million Karelians had to be relocated and absorbed into post-war Finland. Subsequently, the Finnish government assigned Karelians to Finnish households. Those households had no choice in the matter. Some of them realized the need of their countrymen, whereas others complied with great resentment. These were times of war. These were lean times. Survival, more than charity, was foremost in most minds.

Perhaps there was also an underlying animosity toward the Karelians for not being 'strong' enough to hold back the greedy Soviet power, for allowing 'the Ruskie,' the Russians, to gain a foothold. Did this animosity now begrudge them their subcultural uniqueness? The Karelians, though they are Finnish, are a people who by nature and character are open and expressive. All of a sudden, to many Finns, the Karelians' loquaciousness and expressive openness seemed to become a threat to their way of life and personality, to their 'Finnishness.' They seemed too sanguine. Finns, for the most part, have always been introverted. Having the Karelians come and integrate into Finnish society caused a sort of anxiety which manifested itself in derogatory labeling. Some even went so far as to call the Karelians by the same name they called the Russians - a *ryssä*, 'the Ruskie' (although the Karelians were not Russian, in the least, but Finnish to the core). However, the geographical proximity of Karelia to the Soviet Union facilitated the Finns' perception of the Karelians to be more Russian than Finnish, so as to warrant undeserved hostility.

Unfortunately, throughout history, anyone who is different from the mainstream population is easily labeled. It seems to be a natural human trait. Generalization and prejudice prevail when people refuse to look past the differences in colour, race, culture, religion, gender, et cetera. Not only has the concept of the 'other' dominated partition literature with its descriptions of communal riots, violence, and national identity, but it is blatantly evident in the area of gender. Urvashi Butalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (2000), highlights the different groups of Indian society, especially the women, who were considered and treated as the 'other' by their own countrymen and by their own communities during the time of Partition.

Throughout the ages, women and girls have been silent victims. Unrest impacts and changes their lives beyond repair. Not only do women lose their husbands, sons, brothers, or fathers in battle, but rape and sexual abuse run rampant, not merely by-products of war, but these brutal strategies, so to speak, are used as a deliberate military strategy to demoralize their men. Women have become the 'other' by which the enemy can inflict further pain and suffering. Laura Smith-Spark, in her article "How did rape become a weapon of war?" in BBC News, Amnesty International, said that 'women's bodies have become part of the terrain of conflict.' And that can be clearly seen in the partition literature of India. However, as we compare the partition narratives of Finland and India, we become aware of how the cultural differences of the two countries affect their recording and portrayal of women's experiences. History hardly mentions women since it was written by men for men, and mostly about men's achievements. Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf bring out in their publication *Women, War, and Peace* (2002) that "Women are victims of unbelievably horrific atrocities and injustices in conflict situations; this is indisputable. As refugees, internally displaced persons, combatants, heads of household and community leaders, as activists and peace-builders, women and men experience conflict differently" (1).

The reconstruction of women's lives that took place after the Partition, have been recorded to some degree. The Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Ordinance/Act, 1949 proves that the large scale abducting, kidnapping, rape and conversion of women did take place in India (Butalia 265). Men of one religion kidnapped women of the other community. Thousands of women were dislocated, often twice: first they were kidnapped by the 'other' community and then they were recovered and restored back into their own where now a new kind of unbearable stigma had to be endured. National honour supposedly lay at the heart of the recovery and restoration operation. Butalia suggests that, "The assumption was that even if asked for their opinion, women would not be able to voice an independent one because they were in situations of oppression." She goes on saying, that in a patriarchal society, usually, even among their own families, women seldom have opportunities to voice their opinions. "Nonetheless, these were the families which were held up as legitimate; women therefore had to be removed from those 'other' non-acceptable families and relocated into the 'real' ones. This, for the State, was the honourable thing to do" (192).

Vishwanath and Palakonda suggest that family honour is as important as the national one. "Honour is the cherished value in the Indian sub-continental patriarchal families irrespective of caste or regional and religious identities" (386). They continue saying that "Families gain and lose honour through money, power and improper behaviour of women. ... Emphasis on family honour is basic to the Indian social framework since the family still constitutes a very potent force in the social structure." Butalia also brings out how for the honour of the family and of the nation, as well as for the honour of their particular religion, many women were martyred. She has included a story of Mangal Singh. A Sikh, who lived on a piece of land left behind by some Muslims who had escaped to Pakistan, Mangal helped kill 17 members of his own family. "He insisted that the women and children had offered themselves up for death because death was preferable to what would almost certainly have happened: conversion and rape" (195). Mangal Singh goes on, "The real fear was one of dishonour. If they had been caught by the Muslims, our honour, their honour would have been sacrificed, lost. It's a question of one's honour... if you have pride you do not fear" (195).

The situation of women in Finland was different. As men were called to fight the war, women were left to care for the farms and homes. Perhaps they were "backward" as Gyanendra Pandey defined the marginalized: "people who were unfortunately ill-educated and insufficiently enlightened," (Otherness 195) but they were instrumental in keeping Finland functional during the wars in 1939-1944. Though women at that time were vital to Finland's future, they are not given a voice or viable place in history. Much of Finnish literature about the time of the war, which includes the partition of Karelia from Finland, portrays the great national events that took place. Men fought; cities were bombed, destroyed and lost to the enemy; the country lost territory; yet, the daily lives of women who lived in fear are hardly ever recorded.

They, who kept the country functioning, who endured loss and unwarranted humiliation are hardly referred to. The women of both these countries were, like women always have been, the silent, ignored victims and heroes of world events. Surprisingly, any recording of violence toward women or civilians in Finnish narratives is almost non-existent. Nare and Kirves, in *Ruma Sota* (2008), point out that any negative critique about war easily caused an anti-national reputation. Such reputation would be shameful, and shame is a strong motivator in Finnish society. It seems that patriotism was measured by one's acceptance of the justification for war and the inevitable, and at times unpleasant, effects of war. As if loving one's country and opposing the war at the same time could not be possible (9). Pure patriotism seemingly demanded total and unquestioning acceptance of war in all its aspects.

Therefore, it is not the recorded violence toward women and girls that is interesting, but rather the absence of it. Such instances in literature about the time of the war seem to be very few. One such rare occasion is in Laila Hietamäki's novel *Hylätyt talot, autiot pihat* (1982). It brings out the fear and anxiety that was part of everyday life for women at that time. Martta is a woman from a small Karelian village close to the frontlines of battle. While walking in the forest, she is confronted by a Finnish deserter. He comes at her with a knife in his hand. He forces her to the ground. However, before anything can happen, a small girl whom Martta has been looking for in the woods starts screaming nearby. The soldier startled runs away. The little girl saves Martta (29-30). But that is just one story. How many other instances were there? And surely not all ended as Martta's. Fathers, husbands, and older sons had gone to fight the war, and women were left by themselves to take care of their homes and farms. There were no men to protect them from danger. Hietamäki brings out the anxiety and uncertainty about one's future and well-being. More than anything, the Karelian women were afraid of their own countrymen who had deserted the army. In the minds of those women, Finnish army deserters, their own, had become the 'other'. The reputation of those deserters was ruthless. The Continuation War lasted for more than three years. Some of the men in the trenches could not bear it any longer. They deserted their posts. They had lost all sense of right and wrong. War, like communal conflict, had altered people.

The story about Martta and the little girl who saved her also makes one realize that interwoven among the gruesome stories about the experiences of common people in these historical events, were included stories that attempted to restore faith in humanity. Acts of salvation and kindness did happen as well, even to the 'other'. Alok Bhalla's compilation *Stories about the Partition of India* (2012) recites one such incident. On a train to Etawah, was a Muslim woman with her children. An older Sikh man took it upon himself to protect her from a Hindu man who got on the train at the next station. The Hindu tried to arouse revengeful thoughts in the old Sikh, but he failed. Rather, the old Sikh replied, "Babu Sahib, a woman's dishonour is a matter of shame for all men. And sister - he said, turning towards Suraiya, I apologize to you for your having to hear all this" (I:122). The old man goes on to say, "A woman's dishonour is a woman's dishonour - it is not a Hindu's shame or a Muslim's shame, in her the mother of all mankind has been dishonoured." The old man had lost his family, yet he had chosen the path of peace and kindness. He goes on, "My only aim is that no one - Hindu, Sikh or Muslim - no one should ever have to see what I have seen. And whatever befell my family members before they died, may it not be the fate of anyone's wives and daughters ever to have to behold" (I:124). Both stories show us that safety, at times, can be found in the most unexpected places.

How are we to understand the role of 'other' in partition literature? Lee suggests in her article "Silent Trauma: Representing Indian Partition in Subaltern Studies, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*" that "While the Partition designates the rupture of the nation, it also stands for the rupture in the people's lives." (18) People's lives are irrevocably altered by communal conflict, mass relocation of population, and by war. The age-old antagonism between India's Hindus and Muslims (Lapierre and Collins 8) was exacerbated by the cunning strategy of 'Divide and Rule' of the British. They used traditions and economic differences to further the already expanding gap between the two communities. This conflict led to the forceful and violent relocation of about twelve million people.

History tells us how this is not the first time the British have forcefully dislocated people. The violent, forceful deportation of the French Acadians from Nova Scotia in 1755 shows the ruthlessness of the British in their dealings with their subjects. The refusal of the Acadians to pledge loyalty to the Crown of England caused thousands of them to be relocated. It seems that throughout history, the British have benefitted politically and economically from forcefully dealing with those whom they considered the 'other,' those who opposed their power, threatened their authority and refused to facilitate their ideas.

The fear of Soviet invasion of Finland, had caused Finns to acquire a tangible sense of 'otherness' toward the Russians. Anything remotely Russian, especially in thoughts and ideology, was immediately condemned as non-patriotic and punished. That sense of desperate urgency for preservation of independence could be seen in attitudes, words and actions. Finland's independence was at stake.

And too often, it is women's lives that are changed the most dramatically, some for better, but most for worse. However, women are amazing at adapting and changing, especially when children are involved. One sees this in the ancient narrative of the seizure of the Sabine women by the Romans. It is for the sake of their children that they implore the war to cease. For although they were abducted, they had now formed new homes and were these to be destroyed, they would be doubly traumatized. The Sabine-Roman peace conclusion is unusual. That unfortunately is not how history has chosen to repeat itself. Instead of unity, there is deeper division, higher walls, stronger resentment, a reinforced "other" and a desperation to establish one's identity at all cost. One can see true empowerment of women as they survive such grave circumstances regardless of their education or background. They emerge broken but stronger. That kind of bravery can be seen time and time again in the various narratives and novels that are available to us about the partitions of these two very different countries, Finland and India. It is good to not only ponder on the inevitable dark negatives that occurred, but also consider the resilience with which many responded to their altered life situations.

From these two very different countries emerged a morphed genre, wracked in turmoil, war torn, battered, determined to survive, caught between the termination of what they once knew and the dawning of an existence they had not chosen. Ironically, they became the foundation for stabilizing the next generation in a resolve to forge a new beginning or solidify the bitterness of past loss and forever establish its continuing newly evolved identity.

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