‘Barbed Wire’: Objects and Identity in Partition Fiction

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**Introduction:**

The partition and independence of India in 1947 led to an unprecedented turmoil and loss of lives and property thrusting the affected millions into a hostile world. Whereas official documents and histories chronicle the process of transfer of power literature expresses the mass response. This work tries to enquire about pertinent issues like the position of women, violence and the experiences of the refugees by looking at objects that play a role in their better understanding. Three novels by three different authors have been selected for this analysis: *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh, *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal and *Ice-Candy-Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa. This research work, by delving into these novels, tries to unearth, in five chapters, how objects acquire new meanings and how they affect and are affected by the identity of the people associated with them.

**Chapter I: Objects and their valence in critical theory**

An integral part of literature, objects have been analyzed and explored by several theorists for the contribution made by them towards the unraveling of various layers and shades of meanings. T. S. Eliot, through his formulation of the theory of ‘objective correlative’ draws our attention to the use of objects as a concrete external to certain emotions, the representation of which contribute to the evocation of that particular emotion.

Barthes too pays attention to objects like Eliot but he makes use of the tool of semiology to analyze the real nature of objects. He says that the object is considered as ‘non-human’ and the human is defined through this very aspect of the object. The object
takes the role of a mediator between the humans and their actions. It also becomes a
‘sign’ like language as it hints at other meanings along with the accepted one. He
suggests that objects are ‘polysemous’ as they offer various readings for different people
and even for the same person in different situations.

When we study Barthes we are reminded of Marx who opines that objects are
commodities that instigate fetishism. Social products, that is, products or objects
circulated among communities are under their apparent insignificance laden with
theological and metaphysical connotations. Social relations between humans are
transferred to objects and it is in this way that objects like the hammer and sickle gather
their connotations.

Claude Lévi-Strauss reiterates the concepts of Carl Marx as he identifies the
process of the maintenance of the legacies of several clans through different objects.
These objects are termed totems as they represent a ‘ritual relation’ between the human
groups and the objects worshipped by them. This relation is unique as it is inviolable and
the members of the group unconditionally respect them.

Thus objects are often confined within their identities, ‘ironic identities’ as
Foucault terms it. As one proceeds from similarities to differences while classifying
various objects one realizes that any object is characterized by certain meanings though
there may be associations that may vary from these established connotations.

Jean Baudrillard draws our attention to the fact that modern humans are
surrounded more by objects than by other humans. Through their control over these
objects the humans consider themselves to be masters of the spatial and temporal world.
The body becomes important in this regard as it helps in the selling of various objects and itself becomes an object that is consumed; in his opinion the finest object.

The same concept is shared by Martha Nussbaum who presents the concept of sexual objectification by showing how women are treated as dehumanized beings and sexual commodities. She identifies seven ways of treating a person as an object and denying them autonomy. This, she says, is attractive as it enables the objectifier to hold the objectified person under total control.

The observations of William James, the American psychologist about the first formed preferences of human beings is also noteworthy in this regard. Objects are considered important at particular points during development of instincts in animals and if unheeded during this time they do not form similar reactions later. This is true of human beings too. This process, according to Konrad Lorenz, is known as ‘imprinting’ and this perhaps affects the way in which humans view objects too.

Thus objects, often the focus of many critical theories, can be analyzed beyond their apparent meanings and the role objects play in partition fiction is the mainstay of this research work.

**Chapter II: Objects as markers of communities**

There was an abrupt change in the relation between the several communities during the partition of India as communities cohabiting for decades had been forced to accept the division of the country along religious lines. In this context certain objects became markers of certain community as people were ready to kill or die for the preservation of the sanctity of these objects.
The community, meaning ‘a group of people living together or having a particular characteristic in common’ has been analyzed by German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies who opines that the basic form of a community begins with a family while the basic relations are instinctive, as between a mother and her child. The father shares his experience with the children and provides them with guidance so that they can accept the different responsibilities of life. This develops into ‘kinship’, ‘neighbourhood’ and ‘friendship’ and gives birth to the community as we see it today. Thus a bond develops among several members and language plays an important role in creating this bond.

The individual is placed beyond his choice in a community, as Durkheim shows us, because the way in which the community functions is often beyond their control. They have to follow the rules of the community and are often censured if their inclination is otherwise. Social currents of the moment play an important role in shaping the attitude of the individual as seen during the partition of India when certain religious objects acquire particular connotations that brings about a change in the perception of one community by the other. This results in a fragmentation of the self that is in many cases reflected in the responses of the individual towards several objects.

Pre-partition India sees the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities living side by side and respecting the markers of one another, for example, Muslim artisans making the statues and fireworks used by the Hindus during Ramlila. But as partition approaches the blue turbans and the kirpans of the Akalis instill fear not only in the Muslims but also in the Sikh granthi of Pir Pindo village in Ice-Candy-Man as he too is unfamiliar with this divisive politics. Differences of opinion leads to formation of sub-groups among communities as Muslims are divided into Muslim League Muslims and Congress
Muslims. Objects become markers of this difference as the latter are easily identified by their *khadi* outfits and often the target of hatred by the former. Similarly the *dhoti* and *bodhi* become markers of Hindus and often lead to their identification as easy targets by other communities. As the Hindus consider their home and their women as sacred and inviolable they are often targets of other communities as their temples are desecrated and their women treated as objects by other communities. Thus partition forces people to pay importance only to their communal identities and negate all other aspects.

**Chapter III: Objects as markers of gender**

As certain objects become associated with certain communities so do certain objects become markers of certain genders. The country that is partitioned is thought of as the motherland that is severed by her children. Gender, thought of as the state of being male or female, particularly in social or cultural contexts, is considered different from ‘sex’ that refers to biological differences. Judith Butler tries to analyze whether sex is culturally constructed as gender. Gender, according to her, is a representation of various differences such as cultural, linguistic or biological. Some feminists consider gender to be a collection of ideas and some others such as Beauvoir believe that the masculine is the universal gender and so the only gender that exists is the feminine. Thus women are imprisoned in their body. Irigaray further shows that the masculine forces the feminine into silence as the latter is negated as subversion.

Butler thus arrives at the conclusion that gender is formulated by the legitimizing practices of gender consolidation. It is deduced that gender is essentially performative in
nature as it is made of the identity it is thought to be, through a stylized repetition of several acts expected of them. The performers start believing in these acts and this is very true of partition fiction where the genders dare not defy the performance expected of them. The politically constructed female body gains a special importance during partition as it represents the *ghar* as opposed to the *bahir*, the former being the inner core that patriarchy strives to shield against any violation. The women, who are treated as second class citizens, identify with the inanimate objects of their homes as they consider themselves to be animate objects.

The *dupatta* or the headgear becomes a marker of a woman as this covering suggests that she is unavailable sexually. The process of veiling is initiated at a tender age and signifies the social security provided by patriarchy. Strong willed women like Nooran in *Train to Pakistan* or Ayah in *Ice-Candy-Man* refuse this protection as they care little about the dictates of society. Again fallen women like Haseena in *Train to Pakistan* do not have the privilege of wearing a *ghoongat* as patriarchal society wants to establish the fact that they are easily available. What is a matter of shame in the woman due to her lack of status is so in men due to their excess status as we find that Lala Kanshi Ram never again wears a turban after he is forced to migrate to India in *Azadi*.

Clothes play an important role as denial of clothes to women represents their lack of agency and they are reduced to inanimate objects as we see in the parade of naked women at Narowal in *Azadi*. When denuded, men too lose agency, as Iqbal in *Train to Pakistan* or Hari in *Ice-Candy-Man*. However outcasts such as Haseena the prostitute or the hijras in *Train to Pakistan* enjoy a sort of autonomy as they defy accepted social slotting or normative heterosexuality. Their clothes, therefore, become markers of a
defiance that questions patriarchy. This defiance finds expression in the sewing machine of Sunanda in *Azadi* as women seek to rewrite the roles ordered by patriarchy.

**Chapter IV: Objects as markers of religion**

One must not forget that the partition of India was done along religious divisions that gave birth to a disregard of the normal social and ethical standards, a phenomenon identified by the sociologist Emile Durkheim as anomie. Ancient religions, as he tells us, maintained a moral limit which could not be violated by the members of the society. Religious objects were created in this context as a sort of sacredness and inviolability came to be associated with them. Religion was related to these sacred objects which were totemized and worshipped. These objects contributed towards the establishment of a sense of solidarity among the society members.

All religions have one thing in common – certainly intensely held beliefs by the members of the community. These shared ideas establish certain objects as sacred (religious) or profane (commonplace). It must be remembered that the religious identity of a person is instrumental in shaping his own individuality as well as his outlook towards the world. When the individual identity is created it is often based on the concept of *pseudospeciation* as Erikson terms it, that is, the idea of that individual belonging to the ‘one chosen species’. This sense of superiority often leads to the destruction of the other as witnessed during the partition of India. Certain objects however, survive generations and religions, as the sandstone slab in *Train to Pakistan* to which members of all religions pay respect and it becomes a symbol of a metareligious society and an impersonal god.
Niranjan Singh in *Azadi* exhibits the passion related to religious objects. As his religious identity becomes the most important component in his personality he is ready to sacrifice his life for the preservation of any of the five religious symbols revered in Sikhism. When during migration from Pakistan to India it is suggested that he cuts off his *kesh* he chooses his religious self among his plural identities and immolates himself. The opposite attitude is reflected in the attitude of the Sikhs who attack Pir Pindo village in *Ice-Candy-Man* as they prefer to destroy the markers of other religions such as the mosque and rape the Muslim women to establish the supremacy of their religion over others. Thus swords and *kirpans* become religious objects threatening other religions.

Iqbal in *Train to Pakistan* is, however, saved by the *kara* he wears as it proclaims his identity in a communally charged atmosphere and an irreligious person has to take recourse to a religious object to save his life. Not only do weapons acquire certain religiosity in this changed situation but so do bodies and body parts as they are imprinted with religious tattoos. The partition, thus, changes the way in which we view ourselves and others and objects help us in this understanding.

**Chapter V: Objects as postcolonial constructs**

The partition novels chosen for analysis in this research work shows India in various stages of negotiation with the colonial power. They contest the official version of nationalism as one agrees with Partha Chatterjee when he says that anticolonial responses are generated much before they are recognized as a threat. Various objects in these novels give expression to this political response as they can be termed as postcolonial constructs.
As Indians contest the legacies of colonialism the British try to involve the Indians into the dialogue for independence though they make use of the Gramscian notion of hegemony in the process. It is in this context that in *Orientalism* Edward Said draws our attention to the fact that the Orient is the ‘Other’ to Europe and is treated accordingly as an inferior. The status of the Oriental is negated and therefore the decision to partition India is challenged by partition fiction through ‘writing back’ in English, the colonizer’s language. Frantz Fanon’s prediction that the middle class would replace the colonizer in the decolonized countries finds expression in the novels that have been discussed, for example in the character of Inayat-Ullah-Khan, the Sub-Inspector of Police in *Azadi* as he reflects the freedom of bondage from his British masters and uses the *lathi* or beam as postcolonial constructs that become objects of aggression against other communities and indicators of his postcolonial liberation.

As Homi K. Bhabha shows us, ambivalence develops between the colonizer and the colonized as the former encourages the latter to mimic them though there must remain an unattainable gap. As partition sets in the Indians use the objects introduced by the British according to their own requirement. One such object is the train which is now used to disrupt the connectivity promoted by the colonial power as Indians sit on the tracks and negate the punctuality imposed by the British. The newspaper is another object that becomes a postcolonial construct as the Indians appropriate it to give expression to their own views and speak out against the British, for example, the paper *Inqalab* in *Azadi*. The emasculated nation tries to find back its masculinity through the use of various weapons that instead of the British target their fellow Indians.
**Conclusion:**

Thus objects effectively reflect the postcolonial world inhabited by the Indians. It is noteworthy that they bear different connotations according to age, class, community, gender and religion. It is this overflowing of meaning that is the focus of this research work. Certain views have been adopted in this regard as they are suitable to the scope of this work though the existence of other views is not negated. There is also the realization that the novels may not have dealt with several social problems and these issues can be addressed if these enquiries are applied to other texts as well. The novels selected make us aware of the changing equations among different religions and communities as the barbed wire becomes a reality among them. It is an analysis of these various objects that lead us to an acceptance of the reality so that we can strive towards a better future.