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Inherited Past, Emerging Selves: Reconstructing Pakistani Identity in Saadia Faruqi's *The Partition Project*

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the reconstruction of Pakistani identity in Saadia Faruqi's novel, *The* Partition Project (2024). As the novelist portrays cultural, psychological and historical dimensions, the paper seeks to uncover the reimagining of inherited past and shaping of the self through the legacy of partition. The research paper argues how the main character (Maha) is struggling to reconstruct her Pakistani identity through the trauma of inherited past. Maha is a Pakistani-American and is living through the American codes of life alongside the struggle for her Pakistani identity. Drawing upon the protagonist's struggle for her identity in the novel, the paper devises a theoretical framework using Tarun K. Saint's ideas on Partition Literature, especially his focus on collective trauma, selfrealization and fragmented memories. On the other hand, Karen Coats' theorizations with regards to philosophy, psychology and cultural studies support the analysis in order to explain that the narrative is vital to shape the child's sense of self and belonging. She presents Young Adult Literature as a source to construct identity that engages young minds to cultural values, social norms and personal emotions. Faruqi's novel contributes to the comprehensive understanding of reimagining the lost identities, the self-realization of protagonist through inherited past where displacement modifies into an opportunity for cultural proclamation.

Keywords:

Displacement, Fragmented Memories, Inherited Past, Lost Identities, Reimagining, Saadia Faruqi, *The Partition Project*, Trauma

Introduction

One of the momentous and terrible milestones in the South Asian history was the 1947 Partition of India that ended in widespread violence, mass displacement, and the emergence of new national identities. Plenty of writers have attempted to convey the personal experiences and long-lasting effects of the Partition in their works which have explored this historical event in great detail. Shaikh (2006) states that the Indian Subcontinent's Partition has the political and historical background. This event has great importance in history like the two World Wars. The historical aspects of Partition left deep marks in the field of literature and culture. This is the most devastating event in the history of twentieth century and the imprints that it left behind are still fresh today (Shaikh, 2006, pp. 2-9). David Gilmartin (1998) states about the 1947 Partition that every country in the world has a history and no history has a greater impact on contemporary South Asia than the subcontinent's 1947 division into India and Pakistan. From earlier decades, the onset of Partition left profound effects on historical reconstruction. Initially, Pakistani historians not only agree on the significance of the division of historical narrative, although the establishment of Pakistan gave positive response and holds a prominent place in the books of Pakistani history. Historians have incorporated fiction and personal experiences into

their works that shows the distinctive impact of Partition on class and gender. Such type of work implies that in what ways the people retrospect Partition violence that can be highlighted through their forging national identities in new state's creation of Pakistan (Gilmartin, 1998, pp. 1068-1069). The above cited references present the background of research regarding the central themes of the novel. Faruqi's art of storytelling to narrate the plot of the novel portrays that Raheem's family was making preparation for the arrival of grandmother (Dadi) from Pakistan to America. Maha's anticipation on her arrival was crystal clear as she was to leave her room for being assigned the task of taking care of her Dadi. As prior to her Dadi's arrival she was working on her documentary for the history subject so the task was certainly an unsolicited turn in her behavior and change in her attitude. She gets engaged in conversation with Dadi about the Partition of 1947. Faruqi portrays grandmother as a main character who tells Maha about culture, religion and history of Pakistan. This becomes a turning point in the novel when Dadi urges Maha to know more about her past history. Resultantly, she starts to have fasts and offer prayers after knowing about her Pakistani identity from her Dadi. Therefore, the novel culminates with her complete acceptance of her identity of being a Pakistani-American. These details, from the text of the target novel, make a link to theoretical framework devised in the light of Tarun K. Saint's perspectives on Partition, memory and history. Faruqi's portrayal of Maha's interest in knowing the history describes Saints views that the Partition of 1947 is not only a historical event but particularly a continuous psychological as well as cultural trauma: the trauma that configures individual's identity in South Asia, distinctively Pakistan and India. For Saint, the form of remembrance is literature that gives voice to suppressed voices, support to reconstruct the collective memory. Furthermore, joined with the theoretical perspectives of Saint is the core idea of Karen Coats that presents that children's literature is a strong medium to psychological and cultural space through which identity is formed, moral understanding is developed, and emotional progress transpires. The whole narrative of the novel revolves around the struggle of the protagonist for her emerging self through inherited past and culture to reconstruct a Pakistani identity.

Literature Review

Kate Quealy-Gainer (2024) reviewing Saadia Faruqi's *The Partition Project* states that Maha, a seventh-grader, disliked the arrival of her grandmother as she had to give up her room. She observes transitions in both the characters: Maha's struggle to adjust with Dadi and Dadi's struggle to accept her arrival to the US after leaving Pakistan. Maha connects to her Pakistani roots through conversations about Partition. Quealy-Gainer finds Faruqi's novel an easy read to understand in-depth individual details and general essence of the conflicts regarding Partition about the human cost. She analyzes the novel to be less successful as a narrative with an irregular restfulness and squeezed account dumps. She critiques the novel's irregular pacing and moments where Dadi's voice blends with the voice of Maha (Quealy-Gainer, 2024, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, p. 175).

Pooja Makhijani (2024) reviews Saadia Faruqi's novel by observing that Mahnoor (Maha) Raheem becomes a reluctant after-school companion to her sardonic grandmother (Dadi): Rafia Raheem, who had recently arrived in Texas from Islamabad. She points to Faruqi's writing style for conveying the message to her readers regarding culture and religion. She further notes that all the events told by Dadi, like memories of Panjeeri, a nutty halwa-type sweets, and the people who were buried on the side of the roads, are unforgettable. She sums up the arc of Dadi's character in the present as cathartic and heartrendingly sentimental (Makhijani, 2024, *The New York Times*, p. 18). On the other hand, Hayley Morgenstern's (2024) review of the novel focuses on the character of Maha. Her journey shows the power of shared culture and the vitality of archiving personal historical narratives. Morgenstern observes that she has a passion for journalism. Maha wants to know everything about the Partition of 1947 when she confronts the reality that she was totally unaware of her history. She realizes her lack of knowledge about her family's past,

culture, religion, surroundings and identity. Morgenstern maintains that Faruqi's novel is a vessel through which her readers observe how shared culture draws a connection with its past in the present age. They also come to know about the importance of archiving and recording the history and these personal stories about the collective and individual experiences (Mongenstern, 2024, *School Library Journal*).

Amanda MacGregor (2024) talks about the art of characterization in her review of Faruqi's novel. She believes that Maha is an amazing leading character but with shortcomings. As her Dadi is about to come to live with her family, she has to leave her room for Dadi and is forced to live in an attic. Faruqi's portrayal of her character, at that moment, as that of an intolerant, unfriendly and not the best communicator child with the capacity to learn and transform is laudable. MacGregor reads Maha as a round character finally as for her Maha is a great kid and a tremendous character indeed (MacGregor, 2024, School Library Journal). Jessica Harrison (Feb 28, 2024) reads Faruqi's novel as a story in which a teenager discovers what it was like for her grandmother to witness the division of India and Pakistan. She notes that although the plot seems very simple, it is full of heritage, personal trauma, family bonding and friendship. The author made the novel very apt for the readers by weaving the characters and plot together. Harrison analyses how the story unravels through two expressions – one is of Dadi's trauma-shaped, multi-dimensional nature, and the second one is of Maha's strong but sometimes harmful nature. Faruqi provides a very clear depiction of both time periods by showing two generations as that of Maha's and Dadi's. Harrison states that this book is a good source for middle grade readers and their parents to know all about Partition (Harrison, 2024, *Cracking the Book Cover*).

Megan Earlene Olds (2024), as a reviewer praises the structure of the novel and for having strong appeal for readers of middle school. She also urges everyone else to read about this knowledgeable book that involves insights on religion, culture, heritage, identity and immigration. She observes that the book provides the way to make the history fun, personal and interesting for the kids especially and really for everyone. She highly recommends this novel to read for both children and adults (Earlene Olds, 2024, Goodreads Community Reviews). Sadaf Siddique (2024) highlights the busy schedule of Maha's Pakistani-American parents. She critically questions their assigning of the duty of taking care of their mother to Maha. Siddique states that the plot is extraordinarily mournful when Maha comes to know about her hyphenated identity and builds a link between the past of her family and the immigrant experiences (Siddique, 2024, The Horn Book Magazine). Deena Lipomi (2024) also highlights Maha's character with its complications. She observes that Maha's acceptance of her heritage and religion after listening to Dadi's story is commendable in the novel and concludes that the novel inspires its readers to pay attention to their families and culture as well. For her the novel is a complete tale that weaves about friendship and family's relationship (Lipomi, 2024, Goodreads Reviews Community).

Theoretical Framework

This research paper uses Tarun K. Saint's (2020) concepts of trauma and memory along with Karen Coats' (2018) views about children's literature as a theoretical framework to critically examine Faruqi's novel. The paper explores how children's fiction can serve as a powerful medium to highlight the historical traumas. Saint's book *Witnessing Partition: Memory, History and Fiction* (2020 [2010]) is an instrumental framework to examine Saadia Faruqi's *The Partition Project*. This research investigates how children's fiction can be used as a strong vehicle to spotlight the historical trauma with a view to contend important insights into the long-lasting impacts that tremendous violence has on the human mind and imagination. The literature regarding the Partition can be categorized as a body of work centered on the theme of the events of 1946–1947 or their subsequent effects. But in terms of English criticism, a certain consistency was only created about this corpus of work when a number of anthologies came out in the 1990s. Saint, taking Marita Sturken's argument about Freud's work regarding memory, states how it entangles the idea of forgetting. And

after this, it questions how it turns the attention to the cause of hiding memories and why it is so that memories are to be preserved. He also discusses the concept of 'infantile amnesia,' which means that nothing can be recollected and remembered at the infant stage of a child's age. However, the capacity to recall the events and incidents which relate directly to childhood is strong to remember. In fact, the individuals store all those events strongly in their memory. He is of the view that childhood memories are exceptional and unprecedented. He also mentions that these dislocated memories make a way to emit in a more emotional and sensitive way whenever there is a time to remember them again. That is why it is named as 'screen memories', meaning it is very difficult to recall those emotional and painful memories again (Saint, 2020, pp. 1-15). Saint maintains that "Susan Sontag is critical of the way in which memorization of the Holocaust has precluded the creation of memory archives regarding other kinds of atrocities, such as the enslavement of the African-American peoples." Sontag's views assigned more value to memory than thinking: "Remembering is an ethical act and has an ethical value of its own, given that it is the only relation we can have with the dead through the function of mourning" (Saint, 2019, p. 18). An explication of Dadi's character to explain incidents from the novel that directly connects to these key concepts is very helpful: when she indulges in conversation with Maha about the Partition, she is remembering her past and still feels the impact and scars of that incident on her mind and heart. For her, remembering the horrible event of 1947 is an ethical act and glory of her history, culture and identity.

Karen Coats (2018) opines that children's childhoods can be constructed in Young Adult Literature. All the readers who are adults or children approach Young Adult Literature without having a clear understanding of the targeted audience. The subject matter of this kind of literature is to showcase childhood and what it means to be a teenager. An ideology of this kind is a collection of ideas, values, and beliefs—both conscious and unconscious that affect how we read and comprehend books, as well as how we view ourselves and interact with real children. Our ideas feel like common sense or just plain fact, rather than beliefs or values, because they make sense to us. Researching the history of youth literature, however, reveals that ideas about childhood have a particular point of emergence and that they have changed over time. Ideology functions to expand as well as restrict our views of perceiving the ideas and intentions of the author in a text. Ideology shapes our ideas consciously and unconsciously. It also directs human behavior. Faruqi's *The Partition Project* is an example of children's fiction which presents how children's literature becomes a witness of their history, past and heritage. Coats (2018) displays that there is an evolution of ideologies of childhood, as children need practical training while they are performing social roles and some quick modifications to adulthood. They should be raised according to their religious beliefs and encouraged to read tales that depict both forced and natural consequences of aggressive actions. They should be provided with strong moral instruction emphasizing the need to preserve the natural world and humanity's dominance over it. Children should be shielded from harmful influences and should be guided by the correct guidance to make the planet a better place (Coats, 2018, pp. 8-9).

Results and Discussion

The analysis of Saadia Faruqi's novel, *The Partition Project*, is guided by the concepts of both theorists: Tarun K. Saint and Karen Coats around the traumatic effects of the 1947 partition, identity crisis, self-recognition and identification of religion and culture concerning Maha and her Dadi. Their theories closely relate to the themes of partition, identity crisis, recognition of religion and culture in Faruqi's novel. In fact, every event and theme of the novel falls directly in the category of these theories. The novel also throws light on the main character of the novel, Dadi who is the precise model of long lasting impacts of Partition.

Dominick Lacapra (2016) observes that trauma often comes with a good reason and holds an important place in the memory studies. It brings out the importance of affects and

impacts on memory in a very striking way, emphasizing to both traumatic and post-traumatic effects. He argues that there is a need to connect these effects through oral history and testimony rather to isolate them. The fact cannot be denied that trauma and memory are the prominent features of history (Lacapra, 2016, pp. 377-378). These perspectives will help to explain Maha's growing consciousness towards her religion and culture through Dadi's recollections of shared past.

The Partition Chronicles: Evidences of Survival and Memory

Farugi's literary depictions of the Partition offer the critical insights into its enduring effects of violence on human minds and intellect. Sadan Jha (2018) observes that many scholars have researched on the act of witnessing Partition. Also this corpus is strongly linked to the research on memory, history and the Holocaust, all of these have gained a witnessing stature in academia over the years. The act of witnessing has also some transformations over time regarding these three key concepts (Jha, 2018, p. 163). Likewise, Faruqi illustrates the character of Dadi as the projection of witness to Partition. When Maha engages in conversation with Dadi, she tells her about her birthplace and country name. Maha shows estrangement regarding the creation of Pakistan and especially about the Partition. Dadi sadly expresses her wonder that being a teenager Maha was oblivious to her own history and country. Maha denies her connection with Pakistani identity and claims to be an American. Then Dadi tells her that she was born in Ludhiana in 1935. Maha pronounces it very wrongly and Dadi scolds her for an atrocious accent. This is the point when Maha shows interest to know more about Partition and Dadi's past. Her grandmother explains that when she was twelve years old there was peace and everything was great. There was nothing like Maha's father's car and all the wealth that he had. They were simple people and lived in a brick house in a city. They used to sleep on roof where they had a big yard with Jasmine bushes and mango trees. Maha is astounded to know that they used to sleep on the roof which sounds amazing to her. Dadi recollects many a memories from her past to Maha about her family, status and the working places. Especially, when Dadi gives details on the bookshelves in her home, full of Urdu and Punjabi books and that to be educated was worth living, Maha is shocked as she cannot believe that her Dadi's generation had a belief in getting educated unlike her own generation. Here Faruqi offers a subtle dig on the upbringing values of Maha's Pakistani-American parents who have passed on to Maha so weak and valueless ideals about education and family matters.

Religious Amnesia

Farugi's leading female character is the clearest depiction of having religious amnesia in her personality and actions. Maha being grown up in America considered herself to be an American rather than Pakistani. At one point, when Maha and Kim sat in a cafeteria to discuss about their social media class project, Ahmad comes to join them for lunch. Ahmad points towards the food tray and asks them in Pakistani accent whether it was halal? Here Maha scorns that his accent was just like the same as she had watched in Pakistani dramas with Ammi (Faruqi, 2024, p. 60). He asks Maha was she not from Pakistan too? Maha grinds her teeth and grumbles that if someone asked her about her identity she would lecture them to stop judging a person as to who he is by assuming where he is born. Since Ahmad is new so she ignores him and replies that she was born in America and was an American but her parents were from Pakistan and came to America when they were students (p. 52). This incident is a crystal clear depiction of Maha's unconsciousness about her identity. She considers herself as an American. She has identity crisis showing her parents' inability to raise her with a consciousness of her Pakistani identity. These details are parallel to Karen Coats (2018) notions about children fiction and adulthood literature where she explains that children philosophies have changed and there is need to make a transition in their morals and religious values, requiring an immediate social training to adulthood. They should be told their cultural, religious and social stories to truly evaluate their behavior (Coats, 2018, p. 10). Therefore, Coats' point of view is valid with regard to Maha that she

should be trained with consciousness of her religious and cultural background to help her reconstruct her identity.

Heritage Confrontation

Faruqi brings the literary depictions of Partition that illustrate the long lasting impacts and extreme violence on the human mind and imagination marked by the event. Faruqi portrays in the story that how Maha comes to know about the value of relationships. Likewise, when on a telephonic call to her friend Kim, he asks about Dadi, and Maha replies sadly that she has to spare her room for Dadi and she is forced to live in an attic room. Kim asks her to be a good friend to her grandmother. Maha reacts very awkwardly that her Dadi shall spare Maha her personal space. Therefore, Faruqi presents the gap of love and affection in family relationships. It is important to note that elsewhere in the novel when Maha engages in a conversation with Dadi who asks her in Urdu how old was she? Maha does not know how to speak Urdu. However, Dadi keeps talking to Maha mostly in Urdu. Here Faruqi portrays that Maha was totally unaware about her heritage- in fact, about her language, religion and culture. It is important to refer to Tarun K. Saint's idea of memory befitting Maha, who is totally unconscious about her past history. Maha's journey to uncover her family's past is a testament to the long-lasting impacts of historical trauma and the necessity of remembering.

Intergenerational Traumatic Dialogue

Faruqi portrays the intergenerational dialogues that are traumatic and painful by framing the incidents through characters of two different generations. When Maha is serving Dadi as a babysitter she goes to senior activity center where they both meet Uncle Samir who introduces to them all the center activities and games. During this conversation, Uncle Samir and Dadi get involved in a conversation about Partition. Maha shouts: "Tell me about this word 'partition' because I have heard this word more than once from you all." Dadi says: "Partition changed everything" (Faruqi, 2024, p. 100). Samir Uncle nods in the affirmative as a witness to the havoc that the Partition had brought to so many people he had known. There were many families who were massacred. His cousin's village was bloodied because majority of persons were Muslims, and to live in a mixed town was not less than a torture. Maha feels her heart thumping very fast and she is eager to know more about this ongoing talking about friends versus enemies, massacre, bloodshed, torture and being forced to move. She further explains that though she had heard about the Holocaust in her school but not about the Partition. Therefore, her sense of journalism and eagerness to know more about Partition forces her internally and pushes her to "Research, on this; Maha, find out, ask more questions and get info" (p. 100). This conversation clearly establishes a connection between 'generation before' and 'after generation'.

Diasporic experiences and challenges to face

Faruqi interweaves the themes of identity, memory, history and intergenerational traumas in *The Partition Project* to portray the experiences of the South-Asian diaspora. Faruqi portrays how the characters struggle to integrate their cultural heritage and identity with co-existing realities. Faruqi's novel is the clearest depiction of diasporic experiences by her characters. Faruqi presents the transformation of her main character named Maha, as to how she confronts some changes in her personality day by day when she gets more interested in the Partition. She tries her best to know each and every word that is spoken out by Dadi's mouth. Especially when the heard word was the 'partition', she shows more restlessness and eagerness in her attitude to know all about that event. Millions of Hindus and Pakistani's fled to Pakistan and India via trains and by foot. Along their journey, they all faced too many diseases, thirst and hunger as well. Estimation was recorded by the historians that 15 million people were displaced and nearly 2 million died during this bloody

period of the Partition. Those who survived were called refugees and settled in their new homes and struggled to adapt to the place and time.

The Trauma of Cultural Displacement and Dualistic Identity

Faruqi's characters often grapple with the sense of displacement and face identity crises. Basically, they are Pakistani-American, and that is why they are totally unaware of their cultural heritage and real selves. There are many researchers who worked on the themes of cultural displacement and identity crisis about the events which happened in the past, such as Partition and migration. As Rabia Umar Ali (2019) explains about the Partition, reshaping identities, migration and trauma of refugees in an excellent manner, she states that people who were exiled and migrated during Partition have played a vital role in the political and social world in the era of post-colonialism. She observes that the effects were very long-lasting in various ways. The political effect of the traumatic event is the distribution of land that made up the two self-governing states; on the other hand, its psychological impacts were much fierce. She maintains that this event was the cause of taking high-level decisions that dominated the Partition historiography for a long time (Ali, 2019, pp. 1-5). Faruqi depicts her protagonist and narrator constantly within the ambit of remembering Partition and its after effects. When Maha comes to know her past history, as she belongs to Pakistan, she finds herself in the dilemma of having a dual identity. At the end of the story, she accepted herself as the Pakistani-American. But Faruqi's readers could draw the conclusion that she was still unable to leave the American codes of life as she has not performed fully as a Pakistani like Dadi regarding her way of wearing Pakistani attire, offering prayers, having fasts and making Pakistani food.

Conclusion

Displaying the themes of intergenerational trauma, memories of the past, identity crisis and recollection of history, Faruqi's novel is a great addition to the realm of Partition Literature. Utilizing Tarun K. Saint's perspectives on memory, history and trauma, along with Karen Coats' approaches to children's fiction, the research paper explicates the conflict between Maha's and Dadi's generations, the trauma that Dadi's generation had faced before and after the Partition, and the retrieval of memory for the younger generation as that of Maha. Faruqi's novel is a powerful depiction of long-lasting sufferings, pains and pangs of that time, whose mere recollection has the capacity to shape the identity of individual or collective identities beyond the generations. The narrative techniques and devices Saadia Faruqi uses in the novel bestow a refreshed vigour to Partition Fiction also addressing the contemporary concerns. Farugi's novel is about the physical and emotional displacement from religion, culture and history. Maha's physical displacement is apparent when she experiences and explores her past history and diasporic identity. Faruqi portrays diasporic people who are neither complete in themselves as South Asian nor fully Western. They are descendants who faced cultural alienation as well as alienation from their own roots and home. The portrayal of reconstructing self through the memories of shared past is noticeable through Maha's character as she struggles to research more about her ancestral identity. In the wake of an identity crisis resultant of slavish following of American codes of life, Maha struggles to find her lost identity of being Pakistani. The recognition of her displaced self and the quest for Pakistani history and heritage marks Maha's journey of accepting her hybrid identity. Faruqi presents the theme of reconstructing Pakistani identity through the inherited past using the motors and mechanics of Young Adult Literature contextualized in the complex realm of diaspora. Thus Maha, Faruqi's teenager protagonist, accepts her diasporic hybridity and reconstructs the lost side of her Pakistani identity in collaboration with her Dadi.

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