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Unfinished Freedoms: Women, Nation, and Partition Trauma in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Independence

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Abstract
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Independence* (2023) revisits the catastrophic rupture of the 1947 Bengal Partition through the converging yet divergent lives of three sisters—Priya, Deepa, and Jamini—whose personal trajectories lay bare the profound contradictions between a nation's political emancipation and the unrelenting subjugation of its women within communal and patriarchal orders. The novel reframes the very concept of independence, arguing implicitly that national sovereignty without gender justice is an incomplete and morally hollow achievement. This paper reads the novel through four interlocking critical frameworks: Simone de Beauvoir's theorisation of woman as the constituted Other, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, Homi K. Bhabha's critique of nationalist discourse, and Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory. Each framework illuminates a distinct dimension of Divakaruni's achievement: her deployment of female subjectivity as historical testimony, her formal replication of traumatic time, and her positioning of sisterhood as an ethical counter-model to the logic of communal division. Ultimately, the paper contends that the novel performs an act of feminist counter-history, insisting that any reckoning with Partition remains inadequate until the gendered cost of that rupture is squarely confronted.

Keywords: Partition trauma, feminist historiography, postmemory, female subjectivity, diaspora identity, patriarchy, communal violence, Divakaruni

Introduction

When India achieved independence in August 1947, the event was narrated—then as now—primarily as a story of political triumph: the culmination of decades of anti-colonial struggle, the dawn of democratic self-governance, the end of foreign dominion. What this triumphalist account tends to elide, however, is the simultaneous catastrophe that accompanied liberation—the Partition of the subcontinent into two sovereign states, which unleashed one of the largest and most violent mass

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displacements in recorded history. Gyanendra Pandey has described Partition as constituting "the other side of silence" in Indian national memory, a suppression of suffering that was too
enormous, too intimate, and too compromising of the independence narrative to be easily absorbed into official historiography. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Independence* (2023) challenges that silence head-on. Praised by Amitav Ghosh as "a spellbinding saga of the decolonization and partition of the Indian subcontinent, with a case of vividly drawn, compelling characters" (qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 223), the novel positions three Bengali sisters at the epicentre of the Partition maelstrom, narrating the crisis not through the vocabulary of statecraft and territorial negotiation but through the textures of intimate female experience.
Divakaruni herself has spoken of her commitment to writing across difference and community: "I have a variety of readers from across the diasporic community, not just from South Asia. I like to write large stories that include all of us—about common and cohesive experiences which bring together many immigrants, their cultural shocks, transformation, concepts of home and self in a new homeland" (qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 224). Yet *Independence* is more than a diaspora narrative. It is a feminist historiographical intervention, one that refuses to let the grandeur of national liberation serve as cover for the ongoing dispossession of women. Where the male political sphere debated borders, allegiances, and sovereignty, the women in this novel absorbed, in their bodies and domestic spaces, the full cost of those negotiations. The governing irony of Divakaruni's title lies precisely here: the independence celebrated by the nation was never equally distributed. Fathers and husbands continued to govern female bodies; religious communities continued to inscribe on women the burden of communal honour; and the newly sovereign state proved largely indifferent to the sexual violence and social destruction that Partition visited upon women.

This paper develops four interrelated arguments through four theoretical lenses. De Beauvoir's concept of woman as constituted Other—defined not through her own projects but in relation to the male subject—frames the analysis of Priya's feminist vocation. Caruth's account of trauma as a belated wound that returns involuntarily and resists narrative closure explains the novel's fragmented chronology and affective excess. Bhabha's critique of the nation as a site of narrative contradiction and constitutive exclusion illuminates the novel's engagement with post-independence political discourse. And Hirsch's postmemory framework enables a reading of the text as an act of intergenerational affective transmission, carrying the gendered wound of

Partition into the present as an ongoing ethical demand. As Hu Jintao has observed, "culture is a window reflecting the history, culture, and spiritual world of a nation" and "cultural exchange is a bridge to enhance the mutual understanding and friendship between the people of different nations" (qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 223)—a formulation Divakaruni both affirms and critically qualifies, since *Independence* shows culture functioning simultaneously as a medium of community and an instrument of women's control.

Priya: Vocation, Courage, and the Refusal of Immanence

Among the three sisters, Priya carries the novel's most overtly feminist argument. Her determination to train as a physician—in the 1940s, when female entry into professional medicine was a hard-won and socially contested aspiration—is not merely biographical detail but a structural challenge to the gendered order of her world. Simone de Beauvoir argued in *The Second Sex* that patriarchal culture constructs woman as the immanent Other: she is defined relationally, through her functions as wife, mother, and daughter, rather than through her own sovereign projects (de Beauvoir 16–17). The distinction between immanence and transcendence is, for de Beauvoir, the distinction between subjection and freedom. Priya's medical ambition is, in this framework, an unambiguous assertion of transcendence—a refusal to accept definition through her usefulness to male projects of reproduction, domesticity, and social alliance.

What sharpens this refusal into something politically charged is the specific institution Priya contests: the dowry-based marriage economy. The system that assesses a woman's value through caste compatibility, household competence, and the financial transaction between families does not merely subordinate women—it philosophically denies their intrinsic worth. When Priya asks, "Is a woman not valuable enough in herself?" (Divakaruni 87), she is not voicing personal grievance but mounting an epistemological challenge to the entire transactional apparatus of patriarchal marriage. Bhardwaj and Kaur observe that Priya "adamantly refuses, prioritizing her aspirations over conforming to societal expectations" and "rejects the notion of being confined by the constraints of marriage, as it often entails sacrificing dreams, independence, personal identity, and appearance" (225–26). The weight of custom makes this refusal costly: Priya "is forced to suppress her voice, continuing to navigate a life filled with societal struggles, patriarchal beliefs, and inner conflicts" (Bhardwaj and Kaur 226). Yet she persists, and it is this persistence—unrewarded, unprotected, socially punished—that constitutes the radical substance of her feminism.

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The cultural framework against which Priya struggles finds its most economical expression in Alfred Lord Tennyson's Victorian formulation of gendered social roles, cited by Bhardwaj and Kaur in their reading of the novel: "Man for the field and woman for the hearth: Man for the sword and the needle she: Man with the head and woman with the heart: Man to command and woman to obey; all else confusion" (qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 226). Tennyson's verse codifies as natural and inevitable the very division Priya's life refuses. Unlike the heroine of Tennyson's own *The Princess*, whose feminist university collapses and whose narrative resolves in marriage—a capitulation that reinscribes the domestic ideal even while gesturing toward women's education—Priya does not reconcile her aspirations with the marriage plot. Her medical vocation is a permanent alternative mode of self-realisation, not a detour that loops back to domesticity. The courage she embodies is given its most direct formulation in the novel's own words: "The best protection any woman can have is courage" (Divakaruni 134; qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 226). In a world where women's safety was contingent on male guardianship, this assertion carries a weight that is simultaneously personal and political.

Communal Violence, Women's Bodies, and the Logic of Collective Guilt

The communal riots that tear through Ranipur in the novel's central sequences are depicted not as sudden or inexplicable eruptions but as the terminal product of accumulated suspicion—rumour compounding rumour, shared trust eroding through small betrayals until ordinary neighbourliness becomes impossible. Divakaruni understands that communal violence does not require prior enmity; it requires only the systematic replacement of individual relationship with collective category. The moment this replacement is complete, a lifetime of neighbourly coexistence is retroactively converted into a narrative of latent antagonism. The accusation that crystallises this process in the novel—"My husband went to help you and then your people killed him" (Divakaruni 198; qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 224)—performs precisely this conversion. The phrase "your people" abolishes the individual, substituting an undifferentiated communal mass in whose guilt every member share.

Saadat Hasan Manto, whose Partition writing constitutes the most penetrating literary diagnosis of this process, observed with characteristic acuity: "When religion leaves the heart and climbs on the mind—it becomes the poison" (qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 225). Manto's formulation captures the precise pathology Divakaruni dramatises: the transformation of religious identity from an intimate, embodied practice into an abstract ideology of group loyalty that renders all cross-communal relationship suspect. His Bishan Singh in "Toba Tek Singh," bewildered by a border he cannot

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locate and a national identity he cannot inhabit, embodies the absurdity of a political division that has no purchase on the lived texture of human connection. Divakaruni extends this Mantoesque insight with a feminist supplement: she shows that while communal violence victimises all, its particular ferocity is directed at women, whose bodies carry the symbolic weight of communal honour and whose violation therefore serves the strategic logic of communal warfare.

This symbolic logic saturates the novel's social world at every level, from the catastrophic to the mundane. When Deepa attempts a routine business transaction in the company of Raza, a Muslim, the shopkeeper refuses engagement, declaring: "I don't want anything to do with you people or your friends" (Divakaruni, qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 225). The Ganguly women's widowhood and consequent social marginalisation is performed through mockery: "Look look, the strange and unfortunate women of the Ganguly family" (Divakaruni, qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 224). Their neighbours withdraw custom from Bina's quilt business, fearing that "their misfortune will taint the quilts" (Divakaruni, qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 225). As Bhardwaj and Kaur observe, "throughout history, women have been unjustly judged and their character tarnished when they speak out against oppression," and *Independence* holds this pattern up to unflinching scrutiny

(225). The novel insists that communal violence does not begin with the riot; it begins with the daily social grammar of contempt, superstition, and exclusion that is always already in place, awaiting political intensification.

Deepa: Transgressive Love, Exile, and Diasporic Selfhood

Where Priya's struggle is staged in the domain of professional aspiration, Deepa's is played out in the terrain of intimate life. Her love for Raza, a Muslim man, during the period of maximum communal hostility is the novel's most direct confrontation with the question of what the community demands from its women. Divakaruni is careful not to sentimentalise the relationship: the novel registers, with clear-eyed honesty, the genuine social cost of love that transgresses communal boundaries. What Deepa's expulsion from her family and community exposes is the mechanism by which women's intimate lives are conscripted into the performance of collective identity. Her banishment is not a private family drama; it is a communal act, enforced through the withdrawal of social recognition that amounts to what might be called civic death.

The domestic scene of Deepa's expulsion, recorded by Bhardwaj and Kaur, is worth dwelling on for what it reveals about the grammar of communal policing. Her mother, consumed by a hatred she has displaced from the political onto the personal,

confronts Deepa: "It is true, isn't it? You did slink around behind my back with a muslim" (Divakaruni, qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 226). The expulsion follows immediately: "Get out! Pack your things and leave. Now, I do not want you under my roof another moment" (Divakaruni, qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 226). These are not the words of maternal anger alone; they are the words of a woman who has internalised the community's demand that her daughter's body remain within the communal boundary. The character assassination extends into the marketplace, where a shopkeeper taunts Deepa: "Good Hindu girls like you should not be associating men like him" (Divakaruni, qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 225). The phrase "good Hindu girls" condenses the entire logic of gendered communalism: women's moral worth is measured by communal endogamy, and deviation from that standard is a form of moral failure.

Deepa's subsequent reinvention of herself under the name "Aliya" is theorised most productively through Stuart Hall's account of diasporic identity as constituted through rupture rather than continuity, through productive difference rather than stable sameness (Hall 235–37). Deepa does not become diasporic by crossing a geographic border; she does so by crossing a communal one, experiencing the estrangement, loss, and necessary self-reconstruction that Hall associates with the diasporic condition. Her new name is not self-erasure but a negotiation: an acknowledgement that the social conditions sustaining her previous self have been destroyed, and that survival requires a creative, if painful, rebuilding of selfhood from what remains. Bhabha's insight in *Nation and Narration* that the nation perpetually performs its own boundaries—particularly through the regulation of women's bodies—finds its most visceral illustration in Deepa's story: she is expelled not merely from her family but from the community's self-narration, and it is women like her whose exclusion enables the nation's fiction of communal purity to be maintained (Bhabha 1–7).

Jamini: Disability, Double Marginalisation, and the Quiet Persistence of Self

Jamini's position in the novel's feminist architecture is distinctive and deliberately counterintuitive. Her disability—a congenital defect of the leg—places her at the intersection of two overlapping systems of devaluation: gender and bodily normativity. A patriarchal culture that evaluates women primarily through their marriageability, physical appearance, and reproductive capacity has no legitimate place for Jamini; she is, by its criteria, surplus. The marriage economy that Priya resists on ideological grounds has already excluded Jamini on practical ones.

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Bhardwaj and Kaur document the specific cruelty of this exclusion: "she faced constant criticism for not being as sharp-minded as her younger sister Priya, or as beautiful as her eldest sister Deepa," and her physical difference became "gossip fodder among the villagers, leading them to believe that no man would ever marry her" (225). The "narrow-minded society only accepted women who fit their idealized image, leaving no room for imperfections or shortcomings" (Bhardwaj and Kaur 225).

Partition compounds Jamini's suffering with catastrophic immediacy. Her village falls to mob violence; her home is razed; she narrowly escapes sexual assault and is severely burned. Yet, as Bhardwaj and Kaur record, "nobody believed her" and "she became a victim of society's judgment, left to bear the weight of their prejudice and narrow-mindedness" (226). In a cultural economy that equates a woman's worth with her bodily purity, the mere fact of having been targeted is sufficient to render her socially untouchable. The violence done to Jamini is thus double: physical in the first instance, and then discursive—a second violation administered not by rioters but by the community's refusal to believe and its readiness to assign blame to the survivor.

Yet Divakaruni refuses the reading of Jamini as simply a figure of victimhood. Her exclusion from the matrimonial circuit, painful as it is, paradoxically confers on her a degree of observational freedom and relational authenticity unavailable to her sisters. Unburdened by the strategic calculus of marital eligibility, Jamini forms attachments on their own terms and develops a capacity for ethical witnessing that is among the novel's most quietly radical gestures. She survives, maintains her interiority, and refuses the self-diminishment her culture prescribes—and in this refusal consists a form of feminist resistance that is none the less real for being invisible. Jamini's arc extends the novel's central argument: independence is not only a public, institutional achievement. It is also the private, ongoing, unglamorous labour of refusing to disappear.

Traumatic Memory, Postmemory, and the Novel's Formal Ethics

Cathy Caruth's theorisation of trauma in *Unclaimed Experience* centres on what she calls its temporal paradox: the traumatic event is not, strictly speaking, experienced when it occurs. Thenpsyche cannot fully absorb an overwhelming crisis in the moment of its happening; instead, the event returns—unbidden, insistent, disproportionate—in flashback, dream, and involuntary recollection long after the immediate danger has passed. The wound, in Caruth's formulation, is characterised by its belatedness: it consists of an event that "was never fully conscious as it

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occurred" and that returns with the phenomenological force of a present crisis (Caruth 4). Divakaruni's narrative formally enacts this structure. The novel's chronology refuses linearity; its emotional register is frequently disproportionate to immediate circumstance; its female characters find themselves ambushed by the past at moments of present urgency. These are not stylistic mannerisms but mimetic choices—the form of the novel is the structure of the trauma it records.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory carries this analysis into the domain of intergenerational transmission. Children of survivors do not simply inherit stories; they inherit the affective weight of events they never lived through, carrying these as "memories" because the events have been so thoroughly absorbed into the family's emotional life that they shape the child's experience of the world from the outset (Hirsch 5). In *Independence*, the women who survive Partition carry its trauma into every subsequent relationship, decision, and perception. The novel thus functions as a postmemory text in Hirsch's sense, enlisting its readers' imaginative and emotional capacities to inhabit a past they did not live—and, through that inhabitation, to understand the wound as ongoing rather than historical. This is the deeper purpose of Divakaruni's formal choices: the refusal of narrative closure is not mere aesthetic preference but an ethical insistence that the wound has not healed, that closure would be false, and that the reader must sit with incompleteness.

Amrita Pritam, whose poem "Aj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu" remains the foundational literary response to Partition's gendered violence, observed that women's sufferings were largely unwritten, preserved instead in the body and in the silences surrounding embodied experience (Pritam 45). Bhardwaj and Kaur conclude their reading of *Independence* with Pritam's words as an epigraph to the novel's ethical ambition: "There are many stories which are not on paper; they are written on the minds and bodies of women" (qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 227). Divakaruni's novel is an act of transcription: it converts the body's unwritten archive into literary form, making available to readers the testimony that official historiography has systematically suppressed.

Sisterhood, Nationalist Discourse, and the Horizon of Genuine Independence

Against the destructive logics of communal violence and patriarchal control, *Independence* proposes sisterhood not as a sentimental ideal but as a working ethical model. The relationship among Priya, Deepa, and Jamini is marked by misunderstanding, resentment, and competing choices; Divakaruni does not idealise the bond. What distinguishes it from the competitive logics of communal and

patriarchal politics is not its harmony but its commitment: the sisters return, again and again, to the difficult labour of seeing one another clearly and responding with justice. Carol Gilligan's argument in *In a Different Voice* that women's moral reasoning characteristically privileges care and relational responsibility over abstract principle resonates with the novel's ethical architecture. The care the sisters extend to one another—Priya's medical knowledge deployed in the service of survival, Jamini's quiet endurance, Deepa's capacity for connection across social boundaries—constitutes a practice of ethical attention that is explicitly set against the abstracted group loyalties of communal identity.

Bhabha has argued that the nation is constituted through a productive tension between the pedagogical—the authoritative, continuous narrative of national identity through which the state addresses its citizens—and the performative—the daily practices of subjects whose lived realities perpetually exceed and complicate that narrative (Bhabha 145–46). At the moment of Indian independence, the pedagogical narrative proclaimed freedom, democracy, and the dawn of a new era. What that narrative required suppressing was the experience of women like Priya, Deepa, and Jamini, whose lives exposed the incompleteness of the freedom being celebrated: the state had changed hands while the household had not. In Bhabha's terms, the three sisters function as the novel's performative subjects—figures whose existence disturbs the pedagogical story and reveals the constitutive exclusions upon which it depends.

Priya's eventual practice as a female physician within a still-patriarchal society figures what the novel imagines as a form of "restorative citizenship"—a mode of civic participation that insists on gender justice as its precondition rather than its aspiration. Her medicine is not merely a personal achievement; it is a civic practice that embodies the argument that the nation must become what it claims to be. The novel's implicit position—that genuine independence, for the nation as for the individual, is not a completed achievement but an ongoing demand—is most succinctly captured in the title's ironic resonance. Independence names a horizon, not a destination. As Bhardwaj and Kaur observe, the novel "serves as a testament to the resilience and strength of individuals who navigate the complexities of cultural conflicts and immigration" and ultimately "celebrates the indomitable spirit of those who dare to seek independence amidst adversity" (227).

Conclusion

Divakaruni's *Independence* stands as a significant intervention in Partition literature

precisely because it refuses the consolations available to both nationalist and communalist mythology. It will not accept the nationalist narrative of triumphant liberation as a sufficient account of what 1947 meant for women. Equally, it refuses the communalist narrative of primordial enmity, insisting instead that communal violence is produced by specific actors with specific interests, and that its costs fall disproportionately on those—women, the disabled, the economically marginalised—who had the least hand in producing it. Through Priya, Deepa, and Jamini, the novel maps the full range of ways in which women experienced Partition: through the body of professional aspiration, through intimate life and its communal policing, and through the quiet survival of a self that the world has categorised as worthless.

The four theoretical frameworks brought to bear on the novel are not merely analytical scaffolding but interpretive necessities. De Beauvoir identifies what patriarchal culture demands that women be—immanent, relational, Other—and allows us to read Priya's vocation as a sustained refusal of that demand. Caruth explains why the novel's form takes the shape it does: a narrative that circles, returns, refuses closure, and insists on the persistence of the wound. Bhabha reveals the political stakes of the novel's challenge to official historiography, showing how the suppression of women's experience is a structural requirement of the nationalist pedagogical narrative. And Hirsch's postmemory places the novel within the tradition of intergenerational ethical witness—a tradition that understands literature not as decoration but as testimony, not as entertainment but as an act of moral reckoning.

What endures from *Independence* is its insistence that the freedom worth having is not the freedom granted by one government to a population but the freedom experienced by each person within the fabric of their daily life. Until that freedom is equally available to women—until the domestic, social, and communal structures that administer women's bodies are transformed alongside the political structures that administer the state—independence remains an unfinished project. Amrita
Pritam's words, which Bhardwaj and Kaur place at the close of their analysis, serve equally as this paper's coda: "There are many stories which are not on paper; they are written on the minds and bodies of women" (qtd. in Bhardwaj and Kaur 227). Divakaruni's novel has put some of those stories on paper. The work of reading them—and of being changed by the reading—belongs to us.

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