

## **The Horrors of Partition Reverberate still Today: A Study of Mohini Kent's Black Taj**

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### **Abstract:**

The impact of Partition still lingers in the minds of people in India today. Every incident is viewed through the lens of religion and caste. Political, monetary, and selfish motives often ignite this communal fire. Mohini Kent's novel 'Black Taj' vividly portrays the enduring impact of Partition on the people of post-independence India, particularly on women like Simi who grapple with the trauma and prejudices passed down through generations. Through Simi and Imran's star-crossed love story, Kent skillfully navigates the societal barriers and communal conflicts that continue to afflict India, echoing the sentiments of many who still bear the scars of Partition. Kent's poignant portrayal serves as a compelling reminder of the deep-rooted wounds that persist, fueling the ongoing communal tensions in contemporary India.

**Key Words:** Partition, politics, communalism, women, Hindus, religion, communal conflicts, Muslims.

Partition brought the disruption of all social ideologies and disturbed the peaceful coexistence in India. The intoxication of communalism made the common man vulnerable to the changing pattern of social relations with the advent of Partition. Many authors portrayed the violence, barbarity and the holocaust occurred due to religious madness during the Partition period. Some authors brought forth the post partition problems with the mass exodus of people resulting in the problem of rehabilitation and forced displacement. Without their fault, the innocent people made to struggle for survival in an environment of disruption and mistrust. Few authors depicted how the impact of partition implanted in the minds of people, even today with the instances of many communal riots and violence in the post-independence India. It is claimed by a research monograph (Harman na) that after India's Independence about eight thousand riots have occurred.

Mohini Kent is one of such authors. She projected how Partition is being lingered in the minds of the people even today with her outstanding novel Black Taj. Especially women writers do not view partition merely as a holocaust but explore it as a continuation of trauma. Seema Malik in her book Partition and Indian English Women Novelists observes that "Women writers write about the responses of women, of the still hovering shadows of partition, which they alone can perceive, and the anguish and pain which they as women writers can feel and share through their feminine sensibility" (Malik 177). The pangs of partition still reverberate in the psyche of the common masses especially in women who were brutally victimized.

Mohini Kent was born in India and arrived in England at age 21. After studying psychology, graphic design and film production, she became an author, journalist, film-maker and charity worker. She has written for India Today, Times of India, The Tablet and BBC Radio. She has authored four books including the Black Taj. Her other books are Nagarjuna: The second Buddha, Curry Tiffin, Dear Mama and she co-authored the books like Rumi: Unveil the Sun, Dance of The Hour, The Friend: Mind, body, soul, wellbeing. She has done voluntary work for women and children's charities for 25 years.

The Novel Black Taj is set in the year 1993, one year after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Uttar Pradesh by Hindu activists. Though the novel does not describe the Babri mosque riots, it touches its impact on the people and its consequences that are happened in the imaginary town Atmapuri. Simi, a well-born young woman, has so far lived with privilege and certainty but when the Mosque crumbles, so does the careful structure of her life. To the horror of her

grandmother and the outrage of their friends in the riot-torn city of Atmapuri, she falls deeply in love with a Muslim doctor, Imran. Partition stands like a ghost even after 50 years after its occurrence between the star-crossed lovers. Kent rightly says in this novel that the past is always present. A comment of Anita Raghavan can be seen on the cover page of *Black Taj* (2016) as *Black Taj* is 'A riveting read set against an intricate tapestry of love and religion in post-independence India'.

Simi, a 25 year old girl belongs to a Punjabi family. She looks pretty with her green eyes like goose berries and thick black hair that hung down to her elbow. She is the granddaughter of Mrs. Tilottama Bhandari, widow of judge Bhandari, the first Indian judge to be appointed to Atmaputi's high court. He bought the white house from a white colonial in 1943. Old Mrs. Bhandari lives at the white house in Atmapuri with her son Gogu, daughter-in-law Devi and granddaughter Simi. Devi, Simi's mother is an Indian classical singer belongs to the Elvis Presley generation. Mrs. Bhandari is the head of the family and she deals all the family matters. She is a strong woman and good at heart but a dominating mother-in-law. Her son and daughter-in-law could not go against her and Mrs. Bhandari always finds fault in Devi for not persuading Simi to get married. Mrs. Bhandari wants to get her married since she turned 17. But now, her cousin Anjora, Pinky aunty's daughter is getting married on February 21, 1993.

Simi loves her cousin Anjora and couldn't understand how she approved Mr. Anand as her groom only after three meetings. But Punjabi families were like that. Anjora is happy as Mr. Tony Anand comes from a wealthy family. When Mrs. Bhandari informs that Sharma boys, the Brahmins and wealthy people are coming to the wedding and asks Simi to wear something decent as they may like her, Simi retorts, "I hate the caste system when I marry it will be a man, Dadi, not the whole caste or family" (Kent 04). Through Simi, the writer mirrors modern women who are far from religious feelings. "Simi hates her grandmother's prejudice against Muslims which was so bad that she couldn't even bring herself to utter the word, Muslims (Kent 10). She calls them 'Ms'. On the other hand Simi could understand her agony as her father lost much of his wealth, when the country was partitioned and she was witnessed those terrible atrocities. Mrs. Bhandari blames Jinnah and Muslims as responsible for the millions who died in the massacres of 1947. With those suspicious eyes, Mrs. Bhandari accuses Marriam as responsible for the robbery in her house. On the wedding day of Anjora whose expensive necklace of Jaipur Queen was theft. Marriam, the maid had been with them for twenty-three years and in fact her left arm was fractured in two places in the futile attempt of protesting the robbers. Simi loves her old ayah and stands up for her when Dadi threatens to sack Marriam. Simi cries, "If she goes, I go!" (Kent 28) Simi comes to the rescue of Marriam, Jaddan Bai and other women of Nawab Ganj, the Shanti town when the court gives notice to evacuate Nawabganj which is an unauthorised colony over thirty years. The poor who live there got ration cards, electricity meters and even built pukka homes of brick. Once this land had no worth but after three decades it was like gold.

Court gives notice by citing that spreading of diseases like cholera, typhoid are the reasons to have them moved as the lack of toilets along with a surfeit of overflowing garbage heaps. It seems unfair to Simi. So, she stands for them by attending meetings, participating in marches and giving classes regularly on the importance of sanitisation. Simi works for them even at the time of communal disturbances in the town. Simi who is strong, benevolent, empathetic and against to castism and religious fanaticism gets attracted to Imran a Muslim doctor who is also on the same line of serving the society selflessly and he is a strong opponent of religious system in India. He goes to America for education and after returning he encounters the Babri Mosque riots. As a physician, he had witnessed a great deal of suffering following the riots that followed the destruction of the Babri Mosque. Muslims who suffered first-degree burns after Hindus doused them with petrol and set them on fire; Hindus who suffered stabbing wounds or had their eyes gouged out. Over time, any lingering religious beliefs he may have had as a child had faded.

Imran was the grandson of Janab Mir Haider Ali Khan, the Nawab saab of Akbarabad. But Imran lost all his royalty and the kingdom with the demise of his both parents when he was at the age of ten. He was alone until Dr. Chaudhry had picked him up and adopted him and become Dr. Imran Khan Chaudhry. He wants to fulfil the dream of his father Dr. Chaudhry Snr who wants to inoculate the entire population against typhoid and cholera. This is possible only when the Municipal Corporation of Atmapuri (AMC) takes the action against industrialists who are contaminating the water by burying the industrial wastage illegally. In Shanty towns like Nawabganj, people are getting sick by using this contaminated water through communal taps. In addition to this untreated sewage is growing like a cancer in the belly of the city. So, he went to AMC many times with solid reports but AMC officials were corrupted by the industrialists. Moreover, they want to clear the Shanty town by moving the slums to distant Govindpuri. Imran meets Simi at first in the wedding of Anjora who marries Tony Anand, his friend. Again, he meets Simi in the rally to protest against

Municipality's plan to clear the Shanty town. Sanjay Sethi, his friend and a leader of the student's union organises that rally. Slowly they get attracted by knowing each other in rallies, marches, medical camps, meetings where they met with the common cause of brightening the lives of the poor.

Religion stood like a barrier between the true lovers Simi and Imran. Partition reverberated with the demolishment of Babri Mosque and Atmapuri caught in communal fire. The streets are becoming unsafe with looting, burnings and knifings. This reflects how till today India has been facing the communal conflicts the seed of which was sown during the Partition days. People especially women cannot forget as the memory serves to keep the wound raw and as they are the worst sufferers. Mohini Kent brought forth this through the character of Mrs. old Bhandari who says, 'Forget? How can I forget? We lost our home!' (Kent 62). By witnessing the holocaust of partition Mrs. Bhandari develops hatred towards Muslims. She demands, 'Then why the partition if we still have to live with Ms?'.... They should have left us in peace. My father lost everything (Kent 62). Dr. Zainab Banu, in the article, 'Two sides of a coin': A comparative study of the riots at Godhra and Udaipur', brings out, "It was natural....to ask: 'when Pakistan has been created, why does the country still have riots? The question was answered by people from different sections of society- Politicians, Political scientists, National leaders and a few others- differently.... The argument is that some significant structural changes have occurred in the nature of Indian communalism since independence, mainly at two levels: One at the level of Muslim social structure and two at the level of National Politics'" (Banu 1984: 228).

Most unfortunate and disgusting thing is that like Britishers, in Independent India, some political leaders and cruel dons are making use of the caste and religious differences for their selfish purposes. Mohini Kent clearly exposed this through the selfish leaders like Sanjay and dons like Karim Bhai and Kalludada. "Karim Bhai wants the tempest! He said referring to the don. "There's a Hindu fest soon.... The birthday of Krishna Janmashtami"... And Bhai wants the tempest.... 'They'll be having a procession and we must be ready for it'. (Kent 164)

Some common poor people becoming scapegoats in the selfish games played by them. Mohini Kent presented this through the character of Ahmed, the son of Marriam, who is good at heart but his poverty and society made him play the vital role in communal riots. Hena Chaudhuri in her article, 'Women become Bread winners', is of the opinion that 'the country was partitioned to serve the selfish and vested interests of the man at the helm of affairs. Common people became the scapegoat in this political power play. The result – men killed and were killed, women were insulted, humiliated, raped, families were ripped apart.... The scar of partition has still not healed.... (Chaudhuri 86)

Even a small incident of communal disturbances intensifies the worries of Mrs. Bhandari as she immediately remembers the days of partition. When miscreants had thrown stones and set off fireworks in the Janmashtami procession, her heart sank. She says, 'Simi, don't go anywhere alone. 'Lock up your daughters', that's what people said during the partition. Those days are here again' (Kent 169).

Some selfish leaders and religious fanatics are moving the pawns behind the screen and playing with the lives of innocent common people. For instance, selfish Sanjay who wants to become a youth leader plans a scheme with the guidance of his mentor Rajababu Mahajan. The religions, classes, and communities that made up Atmapuri were intricately woven together. The query was, "How could he use that?" (Kent 146). Asghar Ali Engineer in his article about Hyderabad riots points out, "In a ballot-box oriented democracy communal conflict is aggravated due to aggressive political campaigns appealing for votes on the basis of caste and communal ties. (Ali 1984: 291)

In the same manner, Sanjay uses the communal ties for his purpose. Ahmed was astounded to learn that Sanjay had also proposed stirring up trouble at a temple. He called it a detour because he was a Hindu. Ahmed who wants to start up his own garage doesn't want to involve in any tempest. But Kalludada also provokes him to do that. Ahmed could not deny Kalludada who orders him to deposit a dead cow at a temple in retaliation. After disrupting the Janmashtami procession an incident was occurred. A few days later, a bearded mosque cleric near the Krishna temple discovered a pig's corpse. The pig's neck was cut, and its blood seeped down the stairs of the mosque. In retaliation, one day at the porch of pandit Mahesh laid a dead cow. The petals of wilted marigolds dotted the carcass. Murdered mother cow! For such a horrific murder to occur on the steps of his temple, Pandit Mahesh was on the verge of tears.

But poor Ahmed could not assess how severe would be the consequences. He thinks he just laid a carcass of cow. But, it leads to communal riots in Atmapuri. The leaders of the twenty-one largest temples in the city had publicly denounced it. Muslims would keep concealed weapons such as knives, pistols, daggers, and other potentially deadly household objects. There had been brutal street fights between the gangs. Mohammed, a cycle-rickshaw wallah, had been the first victim. Later a while, a Muslim gang attacked a Hindu company in retaliation.

Mohini Kent brought out how mob become mad over small issues in the milieu of religious faiths. In the meanwhile,

the court gave the verdict that the residents of Nawabganj should vacate it in ninety days. Then the bulldozers would roll on Marriam, Jaddan Bai and all other people burst into tears. Imran severely condemned it and gave a long interview to the press and the lawyer suggested to protest it with another street march. But Imran warns Simi not to participate in march as the city is like a powder keg and the police on edge. But Simi felt participating in the march was important for the poor and says 'Don't you see Imi? Marriam is shattered and they're all shattered' (Kent 242). Simi and other residents of Nawabganj does a rally and when it is about to end, there was a brawl in the street. Two little boys were playing marbles as missiles against each other when the altercation began. After one youngster was hit in the eye, his mother rushed over and cursed the other mother for having raised a jungle. The dads then came on board. Friends rushed over. Things quickly heated up to a full-fledged fight.

Simi and other women were very much terrified and struggled hard to reach safely home. First, they reached Jaddan Bai's house and all women were worried about their sons and husbands. "Marriam burst into tears, crying softly into her dupatta. Don't ask My Ahmed's out there'. The tears welled in Jaddan Bai's eyes as well. 'My Farid too. Allah, go with the boys'" (Kent 246). Simi needs to go home as her parents must be worrying about her. Marriam accompanied her. Simi was abruptly struck by horrific sights of rape and murder as her grandmother's stories of the partition came to life. Tongas and rickshaws had been tipped over, and a fabric merchant's store had been set on fire. She cried, death was real, and God was not there. Finally, she reached home safely with the help of Sanjay who dropped them at the White house. The people who are close to each other suddenly turned into enemies.

Ahmed in search of his mother wanders on the road and sees how the shops were looted, people got injured and killed and houses were burnt down. He was much afraid and ran towards Jaddan's house. Jaddan was meticulously killed. In search of his mother, he goes inside of the Jaddan's house. There he finds more terrible - sight.

"Jaddan Bai had been lucky. Her loose kurta and tight chudidhar pyjama were intact. The three younger women had been raped before being stabbed to death. Ahmed saw Farid's wife among them, along with Sushila and Ram Pyari, the two young Hindu women who lived near him and Marriam in Nawabganj. Farid's little son and daughter also lay with their throats slit....Hindu, Muslim, Young, Old their bodies had been left lying around like garbage." (Kent 255)

Hindu, Muslim, Young and Old all are affected in the deadly riots. Ahmed witnessed much violence. He found Munna, the little son of Farid who was hidden behind the door curled up like a tight ball. The little boy was entirely shocked and could not utter a word. Ahmed was in haze of rage and grief as he saw the underserved sordid deaths of his dear ones and burnt in retaliation. "He would hunt their killers down one by one and tear them apart with his bare hands!" (Kent 256)

Marriam, Simi and her family who are in white house are worried so much as the mob smashed Mishra's house and ready to move to white house. When Simi asks her papa to complain to police chief, Gogu says "He's not in town. But they told me he's on his way back. High time too! Nero's away and Atmapuri burns!" (Kent 262). In situations like this, the police could not control turmoil and disappear. Seema Malik Malik also mentions,

The widespread devastation, destruction, kidnapping and abductions went unrestrained and unabated not so much because of its suspension. The police stood indifferent or passive, there by endorsing brutal violence. At times they even joined the mobs in the killings (Malik 43).

Dadi was too afraid and Devi consoles her. "It's the partition all over again, I tell you! Papaji lost everything!" Devi was saying, 'No, No, mummy, this isn't the partition....' (Kent 261). Partition reverberates in the heart of Dadi and of course in everyone now. Even after 70 years around, partition laid its impact on the people.

Ahmed who is roaming on the streets, steers the mob to attack on white house as he goaded by the memory of his mother's humiliation at the hands of Mrs. Bhandari. 'That's the one! Ahmed pointed to the white house. They possess treasures you can only

dream of! ----. Are, those bastards line off your sweat....' (Kent 264)

And another aspect of partition is it paved the way to some people to take their personal revenges like Ahmed on Mrs. Bhandari in the backdrop of economical issues. Ghanshyam Shah in the article "The 1969 communal riots in Ahmedabad: A case study", finds out that

Overall economic crises and scarcity of economic opportunities accentuate all kinds of tensions in the society, providing fertile ground for communal and other kinds of riots. In such a situation, local and immediate factors such as business rivalry or power struggles among various local bosses, communal agent provocateurs etc., aggravate the situation and turn tension into riots. (Shah 175)

Gogu who is in upstairs fires a volley of warning shots with his rifle to scatter the mob, but in return he was shot in

his left arm. The gun shots were heard by Old Mrs. Bhandari as well, and she was moving slowly upstairs when they emerged at the top. Gogu looked horrifying in his shirt covered in blood. After glancing at them, the elderly woman stumbled and fell down the stairs, flinching in fear. At this time, to their astonishment suddenly the mob leaves the white house and go back as Simi makes a call to her husband Imran and Imran requests the Don to leave the white house. Don accepts as Imran saves his wife at the time of her delivery. 'There's only one man who could have saved you and he did.... Karim Bhai. No one else could have turned them back not the police, not the chief minister'. (Kent 282).

It was in the hands of religious fanatics, selfish leaders, dons who steer the mob and innocent people become scapegoats. Ahmed who was in deep despair for not attacking white house, suddenly finds Sanjay in his jeep going home. Ahmed identified Sanjay. "Isn't that jerk who took advantage of me? He shouted to his companions, "He's mine. He owes me'.... Ahmed yelled. 'Hindu dog! People like you use poor people like me!'" (Kent 279). Sanjay pleads Ahmed to leave him but Ahmed could not. His hands clutched like iron bands. Women who were like family had been killed without reason. Ahmed tightened his grip. Ahmed didn't see Sanjay's eyes bulging out of their sockets or hear the dying rattle in his throat. For Sanjay, it was over in a matter of seconds. It was just a lesson he wanted to give him. But anger had seized control.(Kent 281).

Thus, Sanjay was punished for being one of the instigators of the riots. The Hindu youth who saw Ahmed killing Sanjay from distance ran for him. Later it was Ahmed's turn to receive punishment as he knowingly or unknowingly incited the riots by laying the carcass of cow. Finally, Sanjay and Ahmed got their wages but many innocent people lost home, injured and died without any reason and women brutally raped, mutilated, became sex workers, widowed and turned single by losing everything.

'Society did not easily forgive transgressions' (Kent 206) Simi in *Black Taj* also marries Imran against the societal norms and her Dadi and family could not even think of it. 'A Muslim son-in-law? "Devi did not relish the thought' (Kent 210). When Devi says that Dadi couldn't accept the marriage as she had not forgotten the partition, Simi retorts, 'I am sick of the partition! Simi raised her voice. We're still being partitioned every way, everyday!... Eventoday everything was partitioned according to caste, community and religion' (Kent 209). As Simi retorts India is still being portioned with casts and religions. Ritu Menon points out this in the Preface of *Borders and Boundaries* in the context of 1984 atrocities over Sikhs. She says, "it was no longer possible to think of partition as something that had occurred in another country, that belonged to time past. Indeed, it seemed that we could hardly comprehend what was in our midst now without going back to what had transpired then, without excavating memory, ransacking history." (Menon xiii)

Simi is dare enough to marry Imran at Taj Mahal in Agra without informing her parents. Gazing deeply into her eyes, Imran asserts that he takes her as his wife with the garland. He promises to always be there for her, to adore and defend her. They strolled around the monument holding hands while gazing across the Yamuna river. She loves the place Taj Mahal and by recalling the history of great love of Mumtaz and Shahjahan, she decides to marry Imran there itself. She also loves the story of *Black Taj* which Shahjahan wants to build a mausoleum for himself in black marble to complement his wife's white tomb. But his son Aurangzeb thwarted him and thrown in the prison. Simi pointed to it there. That's most likely where the *Black Taj*, like Mumtaz's white tomb, would have been—Shahjahan's black marble tomb. She says to Imi, that it is love. That's also how they'll adore one another. Imran also knows the legend and says, here's my theory – The *Black Taj* is nothing but a fantasy. A dream we've all heard about it, so it's become part of our dreams too. It's my dream, your dream.... The *Black Taj* is a magic box, a kaleidoscope. 'You move it around and see something different each time. Simi did understand. Her *Black Taj* was a happy life with Imran (Kent 200)

Thus, simi saw the *Black Taj* by realising her dream of happy life with Imran by marrying him. Though her Dadi and family couldn't digest it when she reveals of their marriage, finally they accept as Imran saves their lives during the riots and takes much care of Dadi who crippled and panicked with the attack on the white house.

Mohini Kent has aptly taken this theme. Because partition reverberates even today in India with the incidents like 1969 riots in Ahmadabad, Mordabad riots in 1980, Riots at Godra and Udayapur, Babri Mosque riots in 1992, Hyderabad riots, Riots in Varanasi and so on. The religious conflicts that were developed during partition still continuing even today whenever an incident arises. To quell this communal tension, Mohini Kent suggests through her *Black Taj*, political leaders should refrain from exploiting religion and caste differences for selfish purposes and should not use ordinary people as scapegoats. Individuals should not abandon their religious tolerance for monetary or personal gain.

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