

110 | book review

the performance of nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the memory of partition

Jisha Menon, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2013, 272pp., ISBN: 978-1-1070-0010-0, £60.00 (Hbk)

Jisha Menon presents a highly useful scholarly study of the partition of India and Pakistan, analysing this division as fuelled more by political than religious and ethnic forces. Menon is concerned principally with the performative and aesthetic representations in drama and film of the troubled political history of Partition (1947) and its haunting aftermath. She proposes a notion of performance, via 'dramatic and filmic representations of Partition from the 1960s to 2010 ... that trouble the idea of two coherent, autonomous nation-states of India and Pakistan by pointing to the trope of mimetic doubles that suffuse the dramas of Partition' (p. 6).

The Performance of Nationalism includes five chapters, an Introduction, Afterword and illustrations. Menon's critical methodology weaves together historical, performative, film and photographic materials. She draws upon key performance theorists like Rustom Bharucha and Philip Auslander; feminist theorists including Judith Butler, Chandra Mohanty and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan; historians and cultural theorists of South Asia such as Arjun Appadurai and Dipesh Chakrabarty; and scholars of nationalism such as Benedict Anderson and Partha Chatterjee.

The geographical partition of India and Pakistan occurred in 1947 under British colonial manoeuvring that created a Hindu-majority nation of India, and a Muslim-majority nation of Pakistan. It was a bloody period when thousands of Hindus fled for their safety from Pakistan into India, and thousands of Muslims left India to go to Pakistan. People of both communities who had lived peacefully together for centuries were now uprooted. Violent images of ordinary people fleeing on foot and by train, encountering horrific violence, are etched in the memories of people of both nations. The legacy of political instigation of religious conflicts continues even today when, in Menon's words, 'Partition resurfaces as a repressed historical memory' (p. 1).

Menon studies the Indian state's promotion of communal politics via the lens of memory, which is key to her discussion, since the painful history of Partition is still alive among living descendants. 'The uncanny doubleness of memory', remarks Menon, 'that mimetically evokes the Partition, discloses, rather than closes, the specters of the past. These recurrent associations reveal that it is not only a former time that binds one to the memory of the Partition but also a former self' (p. 5). In other words, the traumatic memory of a Partition that displaced 'about 15 million people ... in the largest human exodus ever recorded' haunts the formation of contemporary Hindu and Muslim identities (p. 7).

Indian history is plagued by continuing communal violence between Hindus and Muslims, although such conflicts are always rooted in political forces. For instance, Hindu fundamentalists in the

political party the BJP were responsible for the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, and for the 2002 pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat. Menon remarks that in each instance, 'the Hindu right normalizes spectacular forms of violence against minorities. It is within such a political and social context that this present project acquired its critical urgency' (p. 4).

Menon discusses 'the performative dimensions of political power through a consideration of high political debates and spectacular displays of state power' (p. 19), also termed 'hyperbolic performance of consummate nationalism' (p. 46) via photographs of masculine soldiers with weapons and flags. Border ceremonies between India and Pakistan showcase political power displays undergirded by 'the strategic deployment of language', notes Menon, 'theatrics, and the interplay of speech and silence in political debates' (p. 23). In the struggles between Muslim leader Jinnah and the Hindu-dominated Indian National Congress, Menon probes not only what Jinnah's words 'mean', but also what they 'do', relying on J.L. Austin's seminal work *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin, 1962). Jinnah's 'affective force' was to claim Muslims not 'as a minority, but as a nation' (p.26).

In Chapter 3, Menon explores Ritwik Ghatak's avant-garde film-making that challenges the notion of the nation not only in the breakup of India and Pakistan but also of the state of Bengal into West and East Bengal, the former apportioned to India and the latter to Pakistan. 'Ghatak forwards kinship as the terrain', remarks Menon, 'on which the Partition played out its antagonistic politics' (p. 54).

Additionally, 'gendered violence during the Partition', notes Menon, 'took on an uncanny mimetic dimension' (p. 20). Women, usually considered to be the guardians of tradition, become commodities subjected to male violence on either side of the political divide. In M.S. Sathyu's 1973 film *Garm Hawa* (*Hot Winds*), the Muslim characters' tragic search for home—whether in India as part of a Muslim minority, or by moving to Pakistan and being part of a majority Muslim population—is played out among the men in the family. However, the tragedy of this politically fraught situation falls on female heroine Amina who commits suicide when betrayed twice by broken promises of marriage.

In a hopeful Chapter 5 titled 'Somatic texts and the Gender of Partition', Menon recounts her own travel into Kashmir to encounter Bhand Pather, 'one of the oldest extant folk theatres on the subcontinent' (p. 156). Menon finds the Muslim Bhand's *chok* performances that take place once a year in a Hindu temple as not merely showcasing secularist ideals, but rather as

... confound[ing] the modern polarities of religion in the provocative unruliness of cultural practices. This ritual dance mounts a robust challenge to the religious essentialisms of the arguments for Partition; the Muslim Bhand dancers capture a moment when religious boundaries are blurred in a vivid intermingling of multiple cultural practices. (p. 157)

In conclusion, *The Performance of Nationalism* makes a unique scholarly contribution to Performance Studies by discussing the representations of the historic event of Partition in dramas and films. The book would also be useful to historians of South Asia interested in including imagined portrayals in drama and film in their discussion of historical 'facts'. Perhaps, cultural practices wherein differences—religious, ethnic and regional, among others—can be subsumed, even temporarily, under the common goal of a successful performance can assist in realising secular ideals.

reference

Austin, J.L., 1962. *How To Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Ketu H Katrak
University of California, Irvine

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