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Fractioned, Fissured, and Framed: Considering Public Versus Private Constructions of Muslim Women's Identities in Indian Partition Literature

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Fractioned, Fissured, and Framed: Considering Public Versus Private Constructions of Muslim Women's Identities in Indian Partition Literature

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract 4

Introduction...5

Midnight’s Children...8

Midnight’s Children Today..17

Train to Pakistan...20

Train to Pakistan Today..25

Tamas..26

Tamas Today...29

Partitions..31

Partitions Today...33

Findings and Discussions..34

Conclusions & Way Forward..37

Works Cited..40

ABSTRACT

This Independent Study Project examines the depiction of Muslim women in Indian Partition literature as a means of understanding the relationship between public and private identity. It analyzes the manners in which female Muslim characters respond to and negotiate modes of categorical identification, namely religion, surrounding Partition. Furthermore, this study juxtaposes these generalized accounts present in literature with individual responses from interviews with Muslim women living in New Delhi today. The women spoke regarding their conceptions of Islam and the manner in which they incorporate faith into their overall negotiation of private identity. The project finds that Partition, one of India's most tumultuous historical times, was also perhaps the height of societal judgment based on external identification cues. Women today express commonalities with certain aspects of the characters depicted in these novels, but they generally articulate an acute ability to shape the self without overt influence of public institutions of power, incorporating multifaceted components into their identity, which includes, but is not limited to, religion.

INTRODUCTION

The year 1947 was marred by bloody divisions and violent antagonism perpetrated by organized institutions of power onto individuals who, out of fear and uncertainty, adopted certain modes of perception. Land was not the only thing partitioned during this time as identities and ways of life fractured under the pressure of public perception marked by hatred. Decisions to change borders, redistribute rights, and manipulate factors that dictate communal relations reduced individuals to generalities rendering them voiceless. Renegotiating manners of self-perception and roles within communities was not uncommon, and violence stemming from fear of the newly constructed "other" became a daily reality. A tension emerged because of these national shifts: a common national identity was formed but in doing so it highlighted differences especially regarding religion, causing the presence of unification based on communities of similar beliefs rather than similar locality. In the novel, *Midnight's Children* the protagonist, Saleem Sinai states "To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world" (Rushdie 145). This generalized appreciation for individuals is impossible given the realistic confines of history, however, literature provides people with the opportunity to foster understanding through this method. Thus, while history often cannot accommodate the individuals' narratives who endured the daily tragedies associated with the changes surrounding the Partition of India, literature can, through fiction, depict the truths governing this time.

This paper will examine representations of Muslim women in Partition fiction. The novels discussed include Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) Kushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1971), and Kamleshwar's *Partitions* (2006). While there are overlapping characteristics inherent to the women portrayed within the novels, each author takes his own approach to constructing the Muslim women depicted in the texts. While these novels are generally perceived to be anti-Partition and pro-woman, further analysis reveals

that despite attempts to portray women in a positive light, the often simplistic constructions and lack of agency given to these characters reinforces certain gender roles present in patriarchal India. According to Dr. Saugata Bhaderi, a Professor of English at the University of Delhi “By virtue of sensitizing us against the trauma that women underwent [...] officially partition narrative often appears to be pro-woman but if you do a little deeper analysis that [...] not necessarily does such a foregrounding of women emerge, but in contrast, covert narratives which often border towards masculine domination appear” (Bhaderi, S Dr., Professor of English, personal interview, Jawaharlal Nehru University, April 30, 2013). While Partition narratives are important in raising awareness and at least attempting to portray Muslim women, it is because they often cannot escape the bounds of single, stereotyped depictions, that this paper will incorporate the experiences of Muslim women living in New Delhi today. The women included are in their twenties with college degrees and are either pursuing further education or working as professors. In other words, they are members of the demographic most likely to read the novels analyzed. In this manner, they will provide a contrast or a comparison to the characters depicted in the novels, serving to illustrate and speak to their own identity construction. Though the women featured in this paper were not alive during the Partition, they become significant in identifying the subjectivity inherent to identity formation. Many experts suggest Partition marked the darkest period in India’s history regarding categorical identity and the negative repercussions regarding a lack of control over external perception; however, many of the same issues still exist today.

Scholarship regarding Partition literature varies in its discussion of Muslim women. Criticism generally celebrates the fact that Partition literature as a genre “not only give[s] testimony about the public, aesthetic and translational understanding of the Partition experience,

but it also mediate[s] and shape[s] individual collective narratives of memory" (Daiya 223). Scholars usually examine these novels favorably as modes of discussing important issues. In an interview, Dr. Bhaderi spoke to the fairly new genre of Partition literature and its role in discussing identity, "it's of a fairly recent, synthetic origin" and it "continuously brings into question and problematizes notions of nationality and notions of religious identity as natural, as organic, as neutral, as fixed [...] by precisely talking about the troubles of the partition that precisely bring to the forefront that these identities are constructed" (Bhaderi, S Dr., Professor of English, personal interview, Jawaharlal Nehru University, April 30, 2013). However, much of the criticism published regarding these novels fails to address the presence of women given the fact that they are generally secondary characters or background victims of acts of violence. Some scholars are critical of the genre's often one-note portrayal of women while others commend it for its treatment of women.

Identity is inherently dependent on negotiating a balance between internal desires and intrinsic connotations associated with external perception. No individual may exist in a vacuum free of the effects of those in power, and those in power have the ability to define people through political, social, and even physical actions. Literature becomes a manner in which to view the causes and effects of reshaping and encouraging categorization by providing a generalized voice for the individuals rendered silent by history. Authorial depiction of Indian Muslim women within certain partition novels serves as a lens in which to discuss individual versus societal control of individual identity. As minorities in more than one respect, female Muslim Indian characters must wrestle with external forces of identification throughout the novels, a fact that is not absent from reality. Examining Indian women who either choose to or have other characters define them as Muslim in literature raises questions regarding the necessity and process of

identity formation. While there is no true definition of what it means to be Indian, Muslim, or even a woman, the world operates as if there are certain unalienable qualities inherent to these terms. The subjective nature of identity construction emerges, whether it be on an individual or general scale; the imaginary component common to defining identity both in literature and history arises. When equating how authors shape characters' identities and the process by which those in power, namely men and institutions such as religion and politics, dictate factors that inform definitions of self, literature becomes a tool for social change. Literature provides insight into the complex and subjective nature of identity formation as well as the innumerable interpretations of said constructions; thus, by fostering understanding through analysis, literature encourages accommodation and tolerance of differences rather than fear of what deviates from externally constructed perceptions of individual identity.

MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

Though Salman Rushdie's postcolonial novel *Midnight's Children* is generally perceived to be the narrative of Saleem Sinai, India's "twin," born at midnight on August 15, 1947, the women in Saleem's family become an opportunity to analyze different means of relating to Islam surrounding Partition. These women perpetually attempt to negotiate societal definitions of generation, gender, and Islam, as internal conceptions compete with external perceptions. No character is free of the implications of their history, both personal and familial. Each woman attempts to assert her individuality while simultaneously struggling agains the chains of genealogy and the inherent components of categorical identity. While individuality becomes the ideal, it is impossible to achieve as "among the many selves that constitute one's identity, there exists a relationship of unevenness and asymmetry since each of these selves stems from a history that is transcendent of individual intentionality" (Radhakrishan 757). Therefore, great-

grandmother, grandmother, and sister (in relation to Saleem) illustrate the subjectivity of identity as it relates to religion and nationality. Yet, they simultaneously represent the impossibility of escaping the past. Thus, the difficulties with associating such arbitrary interpretations in the face of whole scale definition and division surrounding Partition emerge.

The representation of Saleem's great grandmother marks the narratives' first depiction of a Muslim woman. She goes without a name, defined by her role as a mother, and by abstraction, gender. While this initial detail of namelessness is indicative of her patriarchal reality, her identity undergoes a massive shift when her husband suffers a stroke, rendering him incapable of performing the necessary duties to support his family. Familial and religious roles change nearly instantaneously as "this mother, who had spent her life housebound in purdah, had suddenly found enormous strength and gone out to run the small gemstone business" (Rushdie 7). When her son, Aadam, returns, he finds "the seemingly immutable order of his family turned upside down, his mother going to work while his father sat hidden behind the veil which the stroke drooped over his brain" (Rushdie 7). This role reversal serves as a commentary on certain inherent religious rituals, such as purdah. Rushdie seems to extol the "enormous strength" it takes for Aadam's mother to run the family business, emphasizing the power of economic liberation to release women from certain constraints. However, his condemnation of the "veil" and symbolic purdah that leaves Aadam's father without control suggests a fierce opposition to traditional religious rituals. Ian Almond argues that "Rushdie seems to encapsulate every reservation he feels towards religion in general-and towards Islam in particular: faith as something essentially childlike and naive, a habit to be grown out of, a near-enough synonym for nationalism and capitalism" (Almond 1137). Ironically, Aadam's mother can only "grow out" of this practice because of economics. However, Almond's view while occasionally accurate, fails

to take into account the nuances of Rushdie's portrayal of Muslim women. There is strength, perhaps to Rushdie, in spite of faith, but he does not entirely condemn the women for their opinions. A tension among the old and new, modern and traditional, reaches the foreground of the narrative as Rushdie challenges Islam but does not entirely denounce its followers.

The true conflict emerges, however, when Aadam's mother expresses her own discomfort with her changing visibility. She bemoans the fact that, "for so many years even [her] ankles were secret, and now [she] must be stared at by strange persons who are not even family members" (Rushdie 16). While the tendency of a modern audience, reading this novel in 1981 or further in the future, may be to support Aadam's mother in her presumed "liberation," this mindset fails to take into account her own feelings. Her way of life disappears in a moment, and her verbalized resistance suggests she endures a daily sense of violation. Thus, while purdah and the stringent guidelines accompanying it may seem like external modes of categorization preceding from organized religion to the individual, Aadam's mother suggests that in some cases physical representations of religious devotion can stem from the individual as well. According to Takim in the article entitled "The Islamic and Muslim View of Women," "the Hijab is viewed as a liberation for women, in that the covering brings about 'an aura of respect'" (Takim 22). This statement counters the notion that Islam restricts women's freedoms or individuality because it shows hijab can be a choice. Her violation from public eyes is the external judgment and modes of identification she cannot control when she is not allowed to observe purdah. When Aadam suggest she wear a burqa when working in the shop in order to alleviate some of the physical manifestations of her anxiety she replies, "Who would buy a turquoise from a woman hidden inside a black hood? It is a question of establishing trust. So they must look at me; and I must get pains and boils" (Rushdie 18). Aadam's mother makes changes to her physical appearance in

order to hide her religion and help her family financially. She loses control over her identity because she cannot express her ideal representation of a Muslim woman. She possesses an acute awareness of her status as a Muslim woman and sacrifices her happiness to adhere to others' expectations rooted in bias. She demonstrates an understanding for the "public versus private, community versus the individual, centrality versus marginality, representation versus obscurity-tensions that plague the modern nation" (Heffernan 474). Thus, even prior to Partition, as a Muslim woman, she understands the limitations of her desires and must allow public perception override her expression of self.

The legacy of subjective links between individual women and Islam continues with Aadam's wife, and Saleem's mother, Naseem Ghani, or Reverend Mother. Her presence in the narrative begins under unusual circumstances; she is only visible in select pieces, a full image becomes allusive. She requires medical attention and her family calls upon Dr. Aadam Aziz to tend to her array of ailments; however, because "she does not flaunt her body under the noses of strange men" Aadam Aziz is "not permitted to see her" rather viewing her piece by piece, "positioned behind [a] sheet. She stands there, like a good girl" (Rushdie 23). Her status as "a good girl" directly correlates with her limited visibility. Thus, a contradiction emerges as her lack of wholeness defines her. She possesses neither a full public nor private identity given her inability to choose the sheet or be viewed without it. Dr. Aziz must visit and view Naseem through the sheet so frequently that he begins to form an idea of her, piecing together individual snippets of her appearance:

> So gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts. This phantasm of a partitioned woman began to haunt him, and not only in his dreams. Glued together by his

> imagination, she accompanies him on all his rounds [...] but she was headless, because he had never seen her face (Rushdie 26).

Naseem is a woman partitioned before Partition. The necessity for modesty through covering and a lack of public exposure prevents unity of self. She is “headless,” serving as a representation for many, easily replaced and copied. As a “collage,” Naseem’s identity is completely external to her internal modes of definition, subjected to Aadam’s incomplete understanding. Perception dictates her appearance as her father keeps her covered and Aadam mixes incomplete snap shots to produce a representation more reflective of his own interpretation than Naseem’s reality.

Eventually, Aadam and Naseem get married, and Naseem, similar to her mother-in-law, begins asserting of her identity through a spoken reverence for Islam. Aadam begins to oozes with contempt for her modest appearance “your shirt covers you from neck to wrist to knee, Your loose pajamas hide you down to and including your ankles. What we have left are your feet and face. Wife, are your face and feet obscene?” only to have her respond “they will see more than that! They will see my deep-deep shame” (Rushdie 38). Naseem wants to hide her physical appearance in order to avoid shame. Thus, once more, Rushdie initially portrays purdah in a negative light only to have women advocate for it. This scene brings up a tension regarding purdah. On the one hand, as is discussed in the article “Liberation by Veil,” “contrary to popular belief, the covering of the Muslim woman is not oppression but a liberation from the shackles of male scrutiny and the standards of attractiveness” (Chopra). On the other, purdah can be interpreted as an attempt to hide the individual, not recognizing her subjective identity. Subverting modern audience expectations, Rushdie shows that certain assumptions regarding women and Islam that are initially viewed as more progressive are just as based in external modes of categorization. Choice, then, is as prevalent in wanting to express oneself through

modes of modesty as it is in not choosing to wear more traditional dress. Aadam Aziz has no patience for his wife's fear of public shame, choosing to ignore her wishes by "drag[ing] all his wife's purdah-veils from her suitcase, fling[ing] them into a wastepaper basket" and "set[ing] fire to them" while insisting "forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman" (Rushdie 38-39). His blatant disregard for her preferences and the subsequently violent actions that destroy the symbols of her preferred way of life are reminiscent of Partition. Therefore, Rushdie constructs a parallel between the everyday implications of living as a Muslim woman and the greater effects of Partition. For Naseem, both instances leave her with less control over shaping the manner in which people interpret her identity. Though borders may change, she continues to experience negative consequences because of the omnipresent external judgment accompanying her identity as a Muslim woman.

Although religious symbols often hinder Naseem's ability to self-identify, her relation to Islam becomes a source of strength as her faith grows. As Naseem becomes more devout those around her begin to call her "Reverend Mother." Her devotion to Islam provides power amidst chaos and subjugation. Ironically, Naseem's devotion causes others to change her name which suggests external mode of identification, but unlike previous methods of external change, this one originates from her conscious choice to observe in a more stringent manner. As the religious fundamentalism and antagonism within society grows surrounding Partition, Naseem wants her children to possess a similar level of devotion: "She made only one educational stipulation: religious instruction. Unlike Aziz, who was racked by ambiguity, she had remained devout" (Rushdie 50). Subverting patriarchal expectations and resisting a more secular modernity, she defends the significance of a religious education for her children.

When Aziz dismisses the tutor, a great riff occurs between husband and wife, illustrating the complicated interpretations of religion even within the microcosm of a married couple. Naseem equates this action with “eat[ing] a pig” or “spit[ting] on the Quran” while Aadam Aziz retorts “he was teaching them to hate, wife. He tells them to hate Hindus and Buddhists and Jains and Sikhs [...] Will you have hateful children, woman?” to which she responds “will you have godless ones?” (Rushdie 50-51). Religion and secularism collide as the two fight over the necessity of religious education. To Naseem, a life without religious education is equivalent to betrayal of God, while to continue with the teachings is equivalent to spreading hate to Aadam. Both individuals have a rightful claim to their opinions, illustrating the difficulties of the times in which both forms of identification with religion are prevalent yet often conflicting. Aadam Aziz relates to “the community” of India as a more prominent mode of categorical identity while Naseem identifies with religion specifically her status as Muslim, as her primary mode of categorization. Rushdie uses the depiction of Naseem to illustrate the inherent tensions surrounding Partition. As a minority, Naseem fears subjugation; however, in order to gather control and feel as though she can avoid it, she must rely on teachings that foster a fear of “the other.”

Naseem’s devotion fuels her support of Partition and desire to move to Pakistan; she finds control in her faith and it becomes the primary instance in which the internal conception coincides with her external perception. Pakistan is a conscious decision because it is an opportunity to move and choose her community: “What is left in this India? Reverend Mother asked, hand slicing air. “Go, leave it all, go to Pakistan” (Rushdie 189). Pakistan is a land of opportunity for Naseem. She gains agency through definition of religion because she associates Pakistan with Islam. However, she cannot move to Pakistan until her husband dies, making his

passing a “relief” as “in his youth [he] despised the Pakistan movement, and who in all probably blamed the Muslim League for the death of his friend Mian Abdullah, had by dying permitted her to go alone into the Land of the Pure” (Rushdie 455). Patriarchy restricts her until her husband dies, leaving her with the opportunity to align national identity and religion in a manner she deems fit. Her gender defines her until she has the opportunity to replace that categorical mode of identification with a religious mode. Thus, religion not only gives her a sense of faith and purity, but provides her with the opportunity to shape her self in the mode she chooses, exchanging one institution, patriarchy, for another, religion. Given her reliance on religion as a means of shaping identity and the superficial power structures dictating the construction of Pakistan it becomes a place of hopeful solace for her.

Saleem’s sister, known as the Brass Monkey, is the final generation of Muslim women represented in the text. She is a deviation from the women represented previously as she relates less to religion itself and more to the implications that stem from it. Determined to rebel in her family, the Brass Monkey does “her best to fall from grace,” efforts that entail a “flirtation with Christianity, which was partly due to the influence of her European school-friends” (Rushdie 351). Thrust into modernity, the Brass Monkey differs from her grandmother and great grandmother. Her “flirtation with Christianity” is not related to a particular affinity for the teachings of the Church but a desire to incur the effects of being associated with it. She manipulates others perceptions of herself through religion. Claiming a certain devotion becomes a means for her to control her identity and the responses of others. While she desperately attempts to frustrate her parents with various symbols of Christianity, “a nun’s outfit” makes an appearance and she fashions a rosary out of “chick-peas on a string” their apparent lack of interest in her superficial displays causes more “religious fervor” (Rushdie 352). Her attempts at

“conversion” are comical because they are completely symbolic and superficial. She wants to control her identity and attempts to use religion to do so; however, her lack of faith in the doctrine she pretends to espouse cannot erase the assigned definition inherent to her Muslim family. Unlike the other women in her family who want to express their faith through physical appearance but are unable to do so because of the connotations, the Brass Monkey uses physical appearance to her advantage but it is not convincing because she does not truly espouse the ideas they represent.

Her inability to construct her own identity using a religion separate from the one she was born into becomes increasingly apparent as the ill-defined public crowns her “the angel of Pakistan,” launching her into a singing career as a national, religious symbol. Pakistan co-opts her identity to the point where she no longer has control over how others interpret and perceive her, a complete shift from her previous attempts at self-definition as a child. Her voice is likened to “the melody of bulbuls and glorious omnipresence of God; a voice which was afterwards compared to that of Muhammed’s muezzin Bial” (Rushdie 408). She possesses the intrinsic quality of a beautiful singing voice, but she cannot control her talent beyond this fact. She sings in public only to have others claim ownership over her voice likening it to religious figures and God. Her previous attempts to negotiate an independent identity using Christianity are a distant thing of the past as she inhabits “Islam.” Thus, unlike her family members who clung to Islam as an escape from the lack of control due to gender, the Brass Monkey tries to form her own identity only to have religious institutions and patriarchy claim her. Furthermore, knowing her lack of concern with the actual doctrines of religion, the audience can begin to understand how arbitrary the association between external perceptions of religion can truly be. Her individuality is re-appropriated to serve the needs of a fledgling nation. The public forces her to wear a veil,

covering herself for concerts: "Publicity imprisoned her inside a gilded tent; and being the new daughter-of-the-nation, her character began to owe more to the most strident aspects of the national persona than to the child-world of her Monkey years" (Rushdie 436). She loses herself to a nation and patriotism. There is no choice in the manner, just as was the case for many individuals after Partition. Identity becomes a commodity and a political tool irrespective of the individual.

***MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN* TODAY**

While *Midnight's Children* is fiction and must operate in certain generalities as a result of its nature as narrative, there are certain components of the women depicted that become topics of interest when speaking with Muslim women today. The notion of physical expressions of one's religion is an important topic of conversation just as it is significant to Naseem and Aadam's mother. However, unlike the polarized views that exist in the novel, the women with whom I spoke generally espoused views that were open and tolerant of all choices regarding physical symbols of religion. Adiba, a PhD candidate at Jawaharlal Nehru University and a Professor of English, spoke to the concept of purdah. Though she does not wear a burka, her opinion on the issue stemmed from the notion that "here in India there are not one kind of Muslim," a concept repeated throughout my interviews and similar to the variety of religious interpretations within the Aziz family in *Midnight's Children*. Adiba addressed physical representations of Islamic identity:

> The religious purpose of burqa initially is to cover yourself plus the cultural connotation [...] For some people even when they are wearing it, they have their own identity. They would wear the burka but they would not close the buttons so it looks like a gown, a more fanciful thing. The purpose in wearing the burka like

> that could be, my interpretation, is that maybe they are ready to carry the cultural connotation with it. 'Look I am Muslim and I don't mind you calling me a Muslim and I don't fear you calling me a Muslim or looking at me like I am a Muslim, but I am not one of those who use it for the same who use it for a religious context I am not wearing it to cover myself I am wearing it because I am proud of my religion and proud of my culture [...] it looks beautiful (Adiba, Professor of English and PhD candidate, personal interview Jawaharlal Nehru University, April 26, 2013).

Thus, all burqas are not made equal just like no Muslim woman is the same. Furthermore, this discussion illustrates that not all women choose to wear burqa as a means of avoiding shame. Naseem and Aadam's mother would make the conscious decision to wear one and observe purdah but for different reasons. Individual decisions do not stop with external representations, internal identity can exist even when certain symbols are present. Thus, it becomes important to understand motivations rather than interpret and assume based on visual cues. The recognition of the choice should be the first step to understanding personal constructions of identity rather than relying on societal perceptions perpetrated by institutions of power to inform one's interpretation of others.

While recognizing the necessity for individual freedom regarding decisions related to religion, Ambarien, a former Fulbright scholar, documentary filmmaker, and Professor at Jamia Millia Islamia University, expressed a personal discomfort with a uniform definition of organized religion. Similar to the Brass Monkey, she emphasized an understanding for religion to fulfill different purposes according to individual needs. Ambarien discussed her own views on Islam and organized religion as a whole:

> I am increasingly uncomfortable with a public display of connected religion, like a connected religion, collective identity is problematic for me. I am uncomfortable with it. I am not a part of any form of organized religiosity. It's like trying to set a norm for this is what Islamia is, this is what Christianity is, but people have their own ways of approaching religion, and maybe, my mother and I constantly have this argument, [...] I don't think there is a collective religion that I identify with but I identify with it in a very personal way (Ambarien, Professor and documentary filmmaker, personal interview, Jamia Millia Islamia University, April 29, 2013).

Personal interpretation takes precedence over organized modes of worship for Ambarien. She recognizes a need for openness but does not believe that comes from a single view of religion. Like the Brass Monkey, she differs in opinion from her mother because they derive different meaning from faith and Islam. In addition, her discomfort with "public displays" of religion relates to the idea of religious forms of dress as means of external identification. Throughout the discussion it would seem that her issue originated with the judgment and assumptions that accompany interpretations of such dress and the notion that to be considered a Muslim woman one must wear a hijab or burqa. However, given her personal interpretation this is not the case. Thus, subjectivity, once again, prevails as she proves the significance of multiple interpretations of a single doctrine.

TRAIN TO PAKISTAN

In *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh, takes a more generalized approach, condemning Partition as he describes the violence that ensues from religious conflict. Female characters fail to dominate the narrative, assuming background roles related to the implications of their gender

at the time. There are only two named Muslim women in the novel, and they cannot escape the power dynamics that render them subservient. External notions of gender and religion become the main modes of categorization, showing the dangers that accompany the lack of voice provided to those who cannot dictate their own identities due to societal circumstance. The novel through the portrayals of gendered violence allows “this sexual violence [to mark] the failure of a patriarchal nation-state to protect both its male citizens and the honor of its women” (Daiya 220). Criticism establishes the reality of India as a patriarchal nation, thus, the change becomes what causes subjugation of women. It shifts from gender issues to those related to organized religion; however, in both instances men perpetrate certain violence, justifying actions through public identities that are entirely external and do not consider the will of individual women.

Nooran, a young Muslim woman living in the village, becomes one of the more prominent female Muslim characters as she interacts with Jugga, the village “budmash.” Within the tiny village, her relationship with Jugga defines her. Villagers objectify her with casual discussion, “Nooran. Did you see her at the spring fair? Did you see that tight shirt showing off her breasts and the bells tinkling in her plaits and the swish-swish of silk? Hai! [...] She must give Jugga a good time” (Singh 10). The men participating in the conversation are unfamiliar with her on a personal level but have no qualms with this degrading description. To the men, Nooran is her body and sexuality. Therefore, the initial pages in the novel posit that women are going to function as objects who are defined by the public. Jugga, despite his more intimate relationship with Nooran, is equally disrespectful. Jugga cannot keep his hands off of Nooran, as she resists while asking “Have you no mother or sister in your home? Have you no shame?” only to have him “cross[...] his arms behind the girl’s back and crush [...] her till she could not talk or breathe. Every time she started to speak he tightened his arms round her and her words got stuck

in her throat. She gave up and put her exhausted face against his" (Singh 18). Though she speaks her mind in this situation and resists his initial advances, she is ultimately powerless to his physicality and will. Her internal desire becomes completely irrelevant when those around her refuse to recognize it as valid. In this manner, Partition literature becomes problematic. Though it necessitates discussion regarding violence against women, it can also "enforce[...] gender binaries by making violence a central part of the tale" (George 143). Especially regarding the depiction of women, *Train to Pakistan* makes violence an inherent part of the narrative that while in many cases is realistic, it negates internal conceptions of identity by not providing an alternative to the violence or more verbal female characters.

Unable to control the situation on her own, Nooran turns to religion for solace, strength, and a means of invoking revenge. As her desperation to be heard increases, she begins to plead "No!No!No! Please" and eventually turns to god for help, summoning, "may Allah's curse fall on you" (Singh 19). Thus, Islam serves as a means to supplement her powerlessness against the external world that refuses to adhere to her internal wishes. However, perhaps in an act of foreshadowing of events to come, this call to Allah does nothing to assuage Jugga's unwanted advances, and Nooran must endure his sexual assault. Religion, which can often serve as a means of communicating the internal identity to the public, fails in this respect, and Partition continues to draw near. Furthermore, Nooran relies on religion for solace after Jugga rapes her, appealing to god for absolution, "If Allah forgives me this time, I will never do it again" (Singh 21). Adopting the psychological profile of a victim who also feels the crushing guilt of unnecessary and incorrect responsibility, Nooran looks for forgiveness. She pleads for divine assistance to avoid repeated assaults illustrating that as a Muslim woman, the public, specifically the male public, dictates her life because her identity is physical and sexualized. She is dependent on two

institutions, patriarchy and religion, because those around her use perceptions to negotiate her identity for her.

Sexual interactions also define the other Muslim woman depicted in the text. A young prostitute, Haseena Begum, barely 16 years old, has not had the chance to form her own identity before the world around her decides she is only good for body, a sexual object available for exploitation. As Haseena and her grandmother enter the room of Haseena's first "client," a governmental officer by the name of Hukum Chand, the novel reinforces gender binaries. When the two enter the room "the young girl just stare[s] at him with her large eyes lined with antimony and lampblack" as "the magistrate ma[kes] a gesture with his hand ordering them to sit down" only to have Haseena salaam and reply "'as you order'" (Singh 35). Obedience of male authority to the point of degradation of self continues. She bows and accepts orders from this patriarchal figure of the government, unable to protest given her status as a Muslim girl. Given his position in the government, this exchange symbolizes the manner in which the government interacted with Muslim women in certain cases. The power dynamics result in a loss of control over private identity as she becomes a body available for use and disposal.

He takes advantage of her lack of control over her status in society to justify his exploitation. He justifies his actions by imposing absolution on her through his perceptions, and he uses her appearance to assuage his doubts because "when all was said and done she was a prostitute and looked it (Singh 37). Prostitution becomes her defining quality because a male governmental magistrate decides it. Her grandmother forces her into the situation and dresses her to display certain codes reminiscent of prostitution and she cannot control the intrinsic definitions associated with her appearance. As a younger girl, she does not have the opportunity to form her identity outside of institutions of power. After he takes advantage of her inability to

protest, he notices that as she sleeps "she look[s] dead except for the periodic upward movement of her breasts vainly trying to fill her bodice" and "her sari was crushed and creased, and bit of sequins glistened on the floor" (Singh 140-141). There is a distinctly violent tone to this scene. His motivations were not religious in origin, however, it is possible to draw a connection between this violence of the more every day to the new violence present due to Partition. As the article "Extraordinary Violence: National Literatures, Diasporic Aesthetics, and the Politics of Gender" articulates, "the violence that Partition brought to women is understood to be similar but of a different magnitude than the usual fare doled out to them in a patriarchal society" (George 136). Thus, given the tragic scene displayed in this instance of the common, everyday, the extent of the assault on identity that occurred during Partition becomes a little clearer. As a woman and as a Muslim she cannot escape the cycles of violence.

When the two discuss Haseena's religion, she does not identify with Islam in a stereotypical manner. When asked about her religion, she practically scoffs at the notion that she could or would be anything other than Muslim, given her name, Haseena Begum (Singh 148). The name becomes a representation of the identity she inherited at birth. While a name can often be seen as personal and unique, in this case, it carries public and intrinsic connotations associated with religion. However, Haseena does not identify solely with the meanings inherent to her name because of her profession. Insisting that similar to "hijras," she does not wholly identify as Muslim or Hindu because "singers are neither Hindu or Muslim in that way" she does not adhere to categorical modes of identity because "all communities come to hear" her (Singh 149). She understands that because of appearance and her name she cannot transcend external modes of categorization; however, she still chooses against adhering to them at least in her self-description. Thus, despite her lack of agency due to her religion and gender she finds comfort in

an internal definition even if it cannot translate to the public. She appears to understand the meaning behind the signifiers and the superficiality behind this existence dictated by the powers at be in her world.

TRAIN TO PAKISTAN **TODAY**

While the women I interviewed did not mention feeling violated, especially in a sexual manner as a result of their religious identity, there are a few parallels between certain scenes in *Train to Pakistan* and individual experiences today. The exchange between Hukund and Haseena regarding her name and personal definition of what it means to be Muslim resonates. Names still carry public connotations in India that are indicative of religion and caste.

Saneya, a professor at the University of Delhi, prefers to keep her last name to herself, forcing others to get to know her before they are given the opportunity to judge based on name. Thus, these certain categorical identities are present in her life but do not define her. Understanding the reality of naming in India and the connotations that accompany both first and last name, Saneya claims her identity in a more private manner by rebelling against these constructs. She articulates her decision as follows: "My name is an Arabic name but it is a very simple name that let's say has been adopted by many people. I do not use my last name so people usually ask me what is my last name so they can place me somewhere, so they can tag me. When they get to know I am a Muslim woman sometimes they are pleasantly shocked" (Saneya, professor, personal interview, University of Delhi, 2 May, 2013). While only a single case, this shows a certain level of progress since Partition. While Haseena has reached the same conclusion regarding the interpretation of names in Indian society, she cannot limit public interpretation of her self. She does not identify with all aspects of organized religion but her name does it for her. Thus, Saneya as a Muslim woman who has many more facets to her identity than religion can

take steps to claim ownership in a manner she subjectively feels fits with her internal conception. Furthermore, unlike the women in *Midnight's Children*, Saneya chooses against revealing her name rather than having institutions of power, in this case, the author, withhold it.

TAMAS

In *Tamas*, Bhisham Sahni, portrays Muslim women in the background, focusing on the violence throughout Partition, but there is also an important exchange between a family of Muslim women and Sikh refugees. As a whole the novel focuses on external perceptions of Muslim women who are rendered silent by the daily tragedies surrounding Partition. The novel does not mention a Muslim woman until more than half way through the text and even at this point the woman remains nameless referred to as Raghu Natha's wife (Sahni 168). This severe under representation of Muslim women reveals a darker side of the nameless and voiceless who endured some of the more horrific aspects of Partition yet do not have the opportunities to gain recognition or have the public hear their stories. Raghu Natha's life is completely defined by her gender and religion as she remains nameless and the only significant note about her character is the fact that "she does not observe purdah" (Sahni 168). Her life is limited to symbols of her religion and gender. Her true identity remains unknown.

The most significant presence of Muslim women occurs when a family harbors a Sikh couple that is dislodged from their village as Muslim men invade. As the couple, weary and depleted after losing their home and wandering all night fearing for their lives knocks on the door of a random house, it becomes clear that their lives depend on the following interaction:

> The woman (opening the door) paused. For a moment the woman stood undecided. It was that fateful moment when a person has to make up his or her

> mind, goaded by lifelong influences and beliefs. The woman kept look at them, then, throwing the door open, said 'Come. Come inside' (Sahni 254).

The tension in this scene is nearly palpable as it becomes painfully clear that external indicators could doom the couple to wandering in the dangerous streets. The Muslim woman who opens the door decides to put her religion aside in order to help people. Thus, the politics that dictate hate do not necessarily mirror individual relationships and actions. Partition, then, becomes a political issue that invades individual, private lives but does not necessarily originate with them.

However, despite the initial hope inspired by this small act of kindness, the two families are not able to forgo their categorical differences given the reality of the violence, fear, and distrust accompanying Partition. Though the older woman who opens the door sets aside her fears for the moment to welcome the couple into her home, her daughter is not as trusting "the young woman kept staring hard at them. There was suspicion and doubt lurking in her eyes" (Sahni 254). This suggests a generational difference regarding relation to religion versus adherence to a greater community. While the mother most likely lived long enough to feel a greater affinity with her sense of place as it relates to identity, the daughter, growing up around Partition identifies more with religious solidarity than that of locality. In this situation, the women have power and respond to it in different manners showing that one religion does not equate with a single reaction. Therefore, just as adherence to religion and interpretations of doctrines differ, there is no single response to the animosity that emerged among religious groups.

The dynamic becomes more complicated as the Sikh couple learns that the women's male family members have gone out with the mob, and thus, they are not truly protected in the home. The mother who is initially open, must voice her concern:

> Had it been some other time, it would have been different. But nowadays everyone wants to go his own way. Nobody listens to others. I have told you that our men have gone out and that they must be about to return. I do not know how they will treat you. Don't blame me if anything goes wrong (Sahni 257).

Their lack of power emerges as they can only make the decision to harbor the couple until their men return. Their gender renders them incapable of breaking from societal constraints and institutions. The shifts are drastic enough to cause deviations within the family. Eventually the couple must leave the house to avoid coming into contact with the son who is a member of the League showing the ultimate inability of individuals, despite beliefs otherwise, to stop the greater riffs occurring within society. Simultaneously, this resignation challenges notions of agency as the women seem to have the opportunity to choose a different outcome. The article "Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency During Partition" addresses this tension, stating "women by in large remain non-violent, yet are so often receivers of violent acts" but we "must also consider women's agency as it relates to contributing to or assisting violent acts" (Butalia 13). Given the constraints of patriarchal society, it would seem they operate within their limits, but one could also argue that by failing to protect the family they are supporting Partition. By failing to use the influence they do have they allow categorical identities to dominate and violent acts to occur just as others so often do to them. In either case, it becomes difficult for people to overcome external factors to help one another when fear for individual safety is present.

TAMAS **TODAY**

Given the generally violent tone of the novel and the lack of in depth portrayals of Muslim women, *Tamas* is harder to relate to women's stories today. However, the scene among

the women and the Sikh couple does raise certain themes regarding external qualifiers of categorical identity. When asked about how others perceive them in society and whether or not their internal conception of identity as a Muslim woman matches how society responds to them on a daily basis, the women I interviewed had varied responses. In most cases, the women agreed they had not experienced mistreatment or negative reactions due to their religion, nor did they often experience public categorization based on external factors alone. However, some of the women did state that they often identified as more "Muslim" when there was communal or national unrest related to religion.

Nuqra, who identifies as a "moderate" related to her religion believes that religious conflict tends to originate with politicians. She generally does not feel ostracized because of her religion. She articulates her presence in society as a Muslim woman as such:

> Islam is a minority religion in India. We have a history since Partition and probably before that of Hindu-Muslim riots, the divide that has been there since some time. Which is obviously now that I've grown up and seen around things, it's something that is more, according to my opinion, something that is at a more superficial level. In the sense that as a Muslim I don't feel animosity or indifference with a resident Hindu because in the way we speak, the language we speak, the way we collect together or the way we study together or commune together really there is no difference. The only divides are at the level of discourse. The particular faith that they follow and the particular faith that we follow the difference is really there when it is made out to be a difference categorically (Nuqra, IMFL Post-Graduate Student, personal interview, Jamia Millia Islamia University, April 25, 2013).

She articulates a rather common point of view. Partition was a political act and identities were co-opted to inspire animosity among religious groups to fuel political needs. However, despite this view, Nuqra admits that during violent times she finds herself tending to identify more as Muslim because of the divides occurring within society. While she states that rarely if at all has anyone actually approached her and outright said “you are a Muslim so we connect with you more, or the other way around you are a Muslim so we should probably just not be with you” differences do become more during apparent violent times. This, like the people in the novel, affects where she chooses to live. Neighborhood often equals safety in locality:

> I stay in a locality which is a Muslim majority locality, within Delhi, within South Delhi which is over near Jamia. There is 95% majority, Muslim majority. When I was very small, especially after the 2002 riots [...] since that time, people have become a little wary about where they are choosing to live. Currently the situation has been changing, but we’ve heard stories about people, where one or two families living where the rest of them are different faith, people were targeting those single families, trying to kill them [...] that is the only thing I can think of, something I would make a decision on based on my religion (Nuqra, IMFL Post-Graduate Student, personal interview, Jamia Millia Islamia University, April 25, 2013).

Only when her external environment is unsafe and beyond her control does she adhere to categorical methods of identification. Thus, the reality behind Partition emerges. When violence based on religious differences threatens safety, communities bond together for comfort and protection. However, by maintaining community based on religion one could argue people are reinforcing the modes of identification that contributed to the violence in the first place. Catarina

Kinnvall addresses this common phenomenon in her article “Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security,” as she states “nationalism and religion, as identity signifiers, are likely to increase ontological security while minimizing existential anxiety” (Kinnvall 763). It is human nature to crave safety. Faith and adherence to greater institutions become sources of comfort during turbulent times. Living among others only increases this sense of calm and control over the self during times of external, public chaos.

PARTITIONS

Similar to *Midnight’s Children*, Kamleshwar’s *Partitions* portrays more vocal Muslim women, making them representative of individual experience rather than as victims of widespread violence. A more modern revisit to Partition, the novel portrays a strong and outspoken women named Salma who refuses to adhere to manners of categorical identification that dominate those around her. She is fiercely independent and guards her private identity against external forces with a determination unlike any of the characters in the other novels discussed in this paper. Fighting against the constraints of patriarchy, state, and religion, Salma argues for independence and a divorce from violent tendencies based on misunderstood stereotypes relating to public perception of individual identity.

Salma is a free-thinking, independent spirit who has no patience for the Hindu-Muslim divide. She is educated and comes from a powerful family as she is the granddaughter of Janab Aftab Ahmad of the CSP in Pakistan; however, she does not claim particular loyalty to Pakistan or India. Her neutrality regarding India and Pakistan manifests itself through her description of her origin, “although I was born in Hindustan--in 1947--I was conceived in Pakistan” (Kamleshwar 92). She functions as a metaphorical daughter of both Hindustan and Pakistan. While as a Muslim woman, her loyalties reside with people instead of arbitrary borders that

politicians divided based on superficial religious constructs. Her private identity becomes more fixed because of her fluid and tolerant nature. One evening, she gets into an argument with a man in a restaurant regarding the combination of religion and nationality, insisting “religion does not establish the parameters of national identity. Much before organized religion came into being, every society functioned on the basis of some kind of faith or principle. If the whole of America embraces Islam today, does that mean it loses its identity as a nation? Will its culture turn Arabic or Iranian?” (Kamleshwar 112). Incredibly articulate, Salma presents a rational and convincing argument while raising interesting questions regarding the nature of religion and nationality. She sees that the politics surrounding Partition are just that, and she refuses to allow them to dictate her conception of self. To Salma, a religion does not define a nation just as it does not define an identity. Furthermore, she criticizes this man for the manner in which men co-opt religion to serve purposes that are contradictory to the doctrines they supposedly espouse: “There are so many depraved bastards like you who use religion as an instrument to satisfy their own carnal desires [...] people like you are always willing to justify your actions in the name of religion” (Kamleshwar 113). She refuses to believe religion justifies poor behavior. She resists the implications of religion as a motivator for violence. In a way, she speaks for the women in the other novels who endured violent acts but could not speak out against them. Not only does she cling to her private identity, but she forces the pubic who attempts to define her through personal perceptions to recognize her internal conception of self as it relates to greater institutions as well.

Salma becomes a key character to exam in her final moment in the novel, as she operates as a voice for a more modern, feminist opinion regarding Islam and the world’s perceptions of it. She asserts that her “reality” like those of the nations she feels affinity towards, it “has been divided like Hindustan and Pakistan” which she posits is “perhaps, [...] the reality of all Indian

Muslim women. Whether a woman belonged to this side of the border or the other, she was never whole. The Partition has diminished her even further" (Kamleshwar 130). The connotations and subjugation of women transcend Partition and the divide only increases the negative effects. She lacks the capability for wholeness, making her the voice of the countries and the women who inhabit the cracks of Partition. Though she is but one opinion, there is a universality in her strength and her experience. Her uniqueness and voice speaks for those who cannot and gives hope that perhaps one day this will no longer be the case.

***PARTITIONS* TODAY**

Salma's resistance to divides based on religious affiliation seem to illustrate a more progressive, and some could say, modern, view. Due to this more progressive opinion, Salma voices opinions similar to some Muslim women living in Delhi today. Ambarien, who is increasingly wary of organized religion understands the tensions associated with being a minority in India:

> I think the fact is that Muslims are a minority in India and when you are a minority in India it is like a double bind. When you have to progress, the state has to give you certain avenues to be able to progress, educatio,n job opportunities, civic amenities, and at the same time the community, the person, him or herself, has to be very proactive. I think there are problems with both of these. I think the way that religions collectively define themselves is a very regressive thing, there is no space, and this is my personal opinion, but I feel that that's the case (Ambarien, Professor and documentary filmmaker, personal interview, Jamia Millia Islamia University, April 29, 2013).

In this manner, she expresses an understanding for the realities of living as a minority in India, but she does not like the lack of progress made because of it. Thus, like Salma, she voices an opinion rooted in equality, opportunity, and a reverence for the individual without external, institutionalized identity. Opportunity should be made available to all, as people, not necessarily as minorities. She calls for an understanding that to help minorities is necessary but the mindset in which the nation does so is the problem; by calling into attention their categorical, publicly perceived identities rather than focusing on the needs of individuals with multi-faceted conceptions of self.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In carrying out my ISP, I came to discover the myriad of manners in which Muslim women define themselves and the equally diverse representations of such individuals in Partition literature. During my interviews, I learned a great deal about how women living in New Delhi relate to religion and national identity. Though on paper, these women can check the same categorical boxes: "Muslim," "female," "Indian," "college graduate" they showed just how superficial these defined squares can be for an individual. Definitions in regards to Islam specifically are changing from generation to generation as priorities and opportunities shift. When asked about whether they feel their experiences differ from the women before them, each woman responded "yes" citing some form of new personal liberty as the cause, whether it be educational, economical, or social. In addition, some of the women cited these differences as the causes of tension among family members due to a lack of understanding regarding shifting religious values. As religion becomes a more personal, subjective aspect of their lives and less of an organized practice through an institution, these women often begin to disagree with their older family members. Considering that these older family members lived during or at least closer to

Partition, an explanation for these ideological differences becomes a little more clear. In the novels, the violence and necessity for religious community is more apparent than it is according to the women today, causing shifts in adherence to doctrine and practices of Islam.

However, not all sentiments have shifted since Partition despite changing ideologies and relations to identity. Many of the women felt that by living in India they were marginalized because of their gender and religion. According to Adiba, "Sometimes you feel as a Muslim woman- sometimes you feel as though you are triply or quadruply marginalized. First you are a woman, second you are a Muslim woman" and then this feeling of being marginalized by the public sphere increases if you are from a "remote place" or a lower caste (Adiba, Professor of English and PhD candidate, personal interview Jawaharlal Nehru University, April 26, 2013). Other women echoed this sentiment in their own words.

Furthermore, the women agreed that there is no single definition of what it means to be Muslim. The significance of subjectivity dominated the discourse during every interview. Stereotypes became a topic of conversation as they defined themselves in line with or against them. Ambarien stated "I would say there is no stereotype of the Muslim. People are diverse" while also addressing the fact that "I don't know what a stereotype is really" because of the wide range of self-defined notions and identifications with religion in her experience (Ambarien, Professor and documentary filmmaker, personal interview, Jamia Millia Islamia University, April 29, 2013). Adiba echoed this sentiment as she discussed that "the definition (of what it means to be a Muslim woman) will change if you go from person to person" (Adiba, Professor of English and PhD candidate, personal interview Jawaharlal Nehru University, April 26, 2013).

When simply asked about whether they were religious and what being Muslim means to them answers varied widely. For Nuqra, who is a self-defined "moderate" when it comes to

Islam: “Islam is nothing but a way of life for me, the way I’ve been taught about it and it’s how your regulate your life style living in a society, living with the people around you, how you interact [...] Obviously it is one of the key things that holds me to it is during testing or trying times.” While for Saneya being religious takes on a more cultural connotation; I do (consider myself religious) but more culturally than what we understand in terms of religion, not institutionalized but more of it’s cultural impact. Because of that instead of Muslim I like to add a prefix to that which is ‘Indian Muslim.’”

Within the literature I examined, I found that a few manners of portraying women dominated the narratives. Within the context of constructions of prominent female characters, these women were portrayed as particularly devout or strongly against conceptions surrounding organized religion. There was little depiction of women who identified as Muslim but simply incorporated it into various other aspects of their identities. Partition and the divides caused by this can account for these seemingly one-note portrayals, but given that these novels were published years after the event, it leaves representations to be desired. Many of the women who strongly identified with religion were depicted as being stubborn and unaware of the secular issues at hand. Thus, despite attempts to bring a voice to women who were silenced by the violence of Partition, the novels as a whole do not bring as much life and diversity as is present in reality. This becomes an opportunity for further research, as there are numerous novels dealing with Partition which could provide a more diverse perspective. Just as each individual provides a unique perspective, so do novels, and the only way to learn more is to continue to read.

CONCLUSIONS & WAY FORWARD

While identity will always be a fight between the public and private by virtue of humanity’s intrinsically unavoidable tendency to categorize based on perceptions, Partition

literature can be a tool for social change by making us aware of this fact. Even today as Bhisham Sahni articulates in the article “Contours of Our Composite Culture:” “A riot takes place only when it is engineered. It is only under external provocations that communal eruptions occur. Even in our relations with Pakistan there is no dearth of goodwill at the level of the people” (Sahni 41). Though literature cannot escape from operating in generalities by a function of its nature, it inspires and encourages analysis and discussion that fuels tolerance and consideration for others. The novels in this paper show a reverence for individuals who are often rendered silent by the hand of history, providing them with the opportunity, though indirectly and through fictional accounts, to gain recognition in society. While the depictions are not always ideal and can leave some individuality in representation to be desired, the attempt at raising awareness must be noted. These novels vary in their approach to the construction of Muslim women living in India, but this variety merely illustrates the many manners in which an individual can relate to categorical modes of identification. Islam may be a single religion but there are multitudes of ways to identify with it, and these manners do not limit or define individual identity either. Therefore, Partition literature suggests that though Muslim women living in India had to experience negative repercussions because of their categorical, public identity related to gender and religion, this does not define them.

In the same manner, women in Delhi today identify with organized religion in a myriad of manners. There are those who view themselves as “conservative” others as “moderate” and still others as “liberal.” It becomes the job of the individual to negotiate her own views with those of others around her, recognizing the subjectivity inherent to each representation despite external cues referring to organized institutions. Thus, while categorical identity continues to exist even after Partition, hatred and antagonism need to persist. Politicians and organized

religion may advocate for limits on identity, but individuals have the power to resist by inhabiting and fighting for private expressions of identity. Thus, through a possession of multi-faceted identities full of varied defining aspects and an equal reverence for others despite differences in such categories, the world can become a more tolerant place. Literature and conversations with women today illustrate that history does not need to repeat itself if discussions remain alive and minds open. Religion may be a part of life but it is not all of life, nor is it worth losing or taking lives; each individual is important and deserves the opportunity to develop identity on his or her own terms, breeding love and appreciation rather than fear and hate.

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