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“Poem Partition” by Fatimah Asghar

Fatimah Asghar's poetic oeuvre, "If They Come for Us: Poems," serves as a poignant elegy to the collective memory of migration and displacement. This anthology delves deep into the recesses of historical cataclysms, with the poem "Partition" acting as a linchpin, capturing the visceral essence of the Indo-Pak partition. Asghar, with her meticulous versification, crafts a mosaic of personal and collective identities that are perennial and ephemeral, especially in the context of the South Asian diaspora.

The partition of India in 1947, a cataclysmic event orchestrated by the decaying British Raj, bifurcated the subcontinent into two sovereign states, India and Pakistan. This geopolitical schism precipitated an unparalleled humanitarian crisis, characterized by mass exodus, ethno-religious violence, and the irrevocable alteration of identities. In her poem, Asghar encapsulates this historic tumult with piercing lucidity.

“You are Kashmiri until they burn your home” - This line serves as a crucible for the Kashmiri identity, emblematic of the historical assaults from Turkic and Arab dynasties. The poignant metaphor of burning homes conjures images of lost heritage and cultural erasure. The personal reflection here is evocative of the Kulak deportations in Bessarabia under Stalin’s totalitarian regime, which decimated the intellectual echelons of society. The resonance of such historical

injustices is particularly salient to those familiar with the Moldovan narrative of occupation and repression, creating a visceral connection to Asghar's verses.

“You’re Indian until they draw a border through Punjab” - The poem highlights the arbitrary yet devastating delineation of Punjab during partition, which was severed with clinical precision by Radcliffe’s line. This demarcation, borne out of political expediency, disregarded the intricate mosaic of Punjabi society, precipitating unprecedented ethno-religious carnage. The poet’s reflection mirrors the deep-seated pain of the Moldovan identity crisis post-independence, particularly the secessionist conflict in Transnistria, wherein linguistic and cultural identities were weaponized.

Asghar’s poems encapsulate the essence of displacement, with each stanza resonating with the echoes of lost homes and fractured identities. The metaphor of “burning homes” is not merely a depiction of physical destruction but an allegory of cultural and personal disintegration. This image evokes a deep sense of nostalgia and loss, resonating profoundly with readers who have experienced similar traumas. The burning homes symbolize the erasure of history and the obliteration of memories, leaving behind a void that is filled with sorrow and longing.

The line “You’re Seraiki until your mouth fills with English” poignantly captures the erosion of indigenous languages and cultures under the influence of colonial and postcolonial forces. The Seraiki identity, rooted in linguistic heritage, is marginalized as English becomes the dominant language. This phenomenon is not unique to the Seraiki people; it is a universal theme that resonates with many cultures around the world. The imposition of a foreign language often leads to the gradual erosion of native languages, resulting in the loss of cultural identity and

heritage. Asghar's portrayal of this linguistic displacement is a powerful commentary on the consequences of globalization and cultural assimilation.

Asghar's depiction of the violence and chaos during the partition of India is both haunting and evocative. The arbitrary drawing of borders by the British, encapsulated in the line "You're Indian until they draw a border through Punjab," led to a massive displacement of people and a tragic loss of life. The poet's narrative is a stark reminder of the human cost of political decisions and the fragile nature of national identities. This historical event, marked by brutality and suffering, finds its contemporary parallel in various global conflicts, where borders and identities continue to be contested, often violently.

The personal reflections interwoven into Asghar's poetry add a layer of intimacy and immediacy to her work. By drawing parallels between the historical events of the partition and her own experiences, the poet creates a bridge between the past and the present, making the historical personal and the personal historical. This blending of the personal and the collective enhances the emotional impact of the poems, allowing readers to connect with the historical narratives on a deeper, more personal level.

The inexorable march of globalization, with its concomitant erosion of multilingualism and multiculturalism, is a recurrent theme in Asghar's poetry. The imposition of English as a lingua franca in Moldova epitomizes this phenomenon, where the acquisition of the language is a prerequisite for upward social mobility and technological accessibility. Asghar's lamentation over the loss of linguistic heritage resonates deeply with this personal narrative.

Despite the overwhelming sense of loss and displacement, Asghar's poetry is also a testament to the resilience of marginalized identities. The persistent assertion of identity in the face of cultural and linguistic erosion is a powerful theme in her work. The poet's narrative is not just about loss but also about survival and the enduring human spirit. This resilience is reflected in the way individuals and communities strive to preserve their heritage and identity, even in the face of overwhelming odds.

The poet's exploration of identity is further underscored by her examination of the liminal spaces that diaspora populations inhabit. The poem "Migration" serves as a poignant reminder of the fragility of belonging, where the act of migration becomes a necessary evil for survival. This liminality is characterized by a sense of dislocation and disorientation, which Asghar poignantly captures through her use of metaphor and imagery.

Asghar's poetry also explores the tension between cultural heritage and modernity. The poem "Heritage" juxtaposes the desire to hold onto traditional practices with the inevitability of change. This tension is particularly relevant in the context of the South Asian diaspora, where the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge is often fraught with challenges. The poet masterfully navigates this dichotomy, highlighting the importance of preserving cultural heritage while adapting to the demands of a rapidly changing world.

Furthermore, Asghar's poetry highlights the complex relationships between identity, power, and politics. The poem "Power" examines the ways in which power structures shape our understanding of ourselves and our place within society. This exploration of power dynamics is particularly relevant in the context of postcolonial studies, where the legacies of colonialism

continue to shape the lives of marginalized communities. Asghar's incisive critique of power and its ramifications adds depth to her exploration of identity and belonging.

The personal connections that Asghar draws between her own experiences and those of others are a hallmark of her poetry. The poem "Family" serves as a poignant reminder of the ways in which family ties can transcend geographical boundaries. This exploration of family dynamics is particularly relevant in the context of diasporic experience, where the act of migration often disrupts traditional family structures. Asghar's portrayal of familial relationships underscores the importance of kinship and community in the face of displacement and loss.

In conclusion, Fatimah Asghar's "If They Come for Us: Poems" offers a profound meditation on identity, belonging, and the complexities of diasporic existence. Through her evocative imagery and poignant reflections, Asghar captures the multifaceted nature of human experience, particularly in the context of historical trauma and cultural displacement. This review has endeavored to encapsulate the essence of Asghar's work and its profound implications for understanding identity in a postcolonial world. Asghar's poetry is a testament to the resilience of marginalized identities and serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring impact of historical traumas. Her work challenges us to reflect on our own identities and the ways in which they are shaped by historical and contemporary forces.

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IF THEY COME FOR US

FATIMAH ASGHAR
POEMS