



“Rows of Naked Women...” Subaltern Bodies and the trauma of Partition in 'Lajwanti', 'Khol Do' and 'The Train Has Reached Amritsar'

English

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ABSTRACT

In this research paper, I am going to present a comparative and contrastive study between the works of three famous Progressive writers on the same issues, which deals with female sexuality under the trauma of partition in relation to socio- historical context. Introducing with Rajinder Singh Bedi, who has stormed in the society by his radical voice in 'Lajwanti'. Lajwanti's (Lajo) identity has lost in the very idea of "Devi", and this idea cause a hurdle to gain her identity again. Next, A fitting symbol of liminal spaces and stark emotional landscape of partition of violence is chillingly captured in this remarkable short story 'The Train Has Reached Amritsar' by Bhisham Sahni, the leading writer of the generation that lived through it. Finally, Saadat Hasan Manto, has more more realistic and shocking records about the crucial and black days of partition. 'Khol Do' emblemizes the grey metaphors of sexual identity and gendered subjectivity in a socio-political empire of those predatory times. Further, the following paper will bring forth the idea of large scale violent migration of 1946/47 and the bodies of women as the location of both masculine violence and the politics of the state. Altogether, the three writers highlighting the psyche of the female victims of that time and shared the sorrow of the partition which has abrupt end a long and communally shared history.

KEYWORDS:

The humorous despondency of the above poetic lines explicitly project the inaudible whispers of the gloomy past taking into account the unaccentuated voices of women in the literature of Partition which was outrageously pen down by the participating practitioners of the Progressive Writers Association. Partition (1946/47) caused a major upheaval in the ordinary lives of common folk thereby furthering a traumatic consciousness and monumental fanaticism accompanied by the gory politics of migration as now the newly formed nations were strictly demarcated by religious majoritarianism that in turn necessitated a communal movement across the two borders. This jeopardizing disruption had a major impact on the female sex who was more vulnerable to both materialistic and phallic violence including misogyny, brutality and finally revenge.

The History textbook of class XII in the chapter entitled "Understanding Partition" highlights the austerity of sexual debasement in the following words:

"Women and girls became the prime target of persecution. Attackers treated women bodies as territory to be conquered. Dishonoring women of a community was seen as dishonoring the community itself, and a mode of taking revenge" (N.C.E.R.T 397).

In short, although women were characterized by sheer silence but their bodies became an active source of communicative exchanges among men across the nations. Moreover, rather than patriarchal dominance of masculine strength and intellectualism, women were colligated only in symbolic terms in the very national body politics during Partition. This was mainly because the idea of nationalism was synonymous with phallic respectability and therefore capable of legitimizing as well as privileging the authoritative control of men over women. Within this national scenario of both physical and psychological turmoil, the fiction of progressive writers like Rajinder Singh Bedi, Sadat Hasan Manto and Bhisham Sahni can be conveniently analyzed and examined.

Rajinder Singh Bedi in his short story 'Lajwanti' affirmatively illustrates the psychological dilemma of Lajwanti (Lajo), a rescued woman from the enemy camp after the traumatic experience of Partition. In addition, the story provides a comparative landscape of ideological as well as mythical differentiations in order to project the profundity of the narrative. The story opens up with the following lines from a Punjabi folk song:

"Do not touch Lajwanti
For she will curl up
and die"
(Bedi 55)

The above lyrics forbear a multitudinous expressiveness thereby conveying a wide range of messages and meanings. For instance, the name Lajwanti functions as a metaphor for feminine docility just as the pure leaves of the tree, which bears the similar name. Besides this, the story is an articulatory exemplar of identity misrepresentation as the very existence of Lajo is enmeshed in the Indian ideal of woman as a 'Devi'. Bedi sums up his compassion in the following words:

"Lajwanti's sorrow had remained locked up in her breast, helplessly, she had gazed at her body and had realized, that, since the Partition, it was no longer her own body, but the body of a goddess" (Bedi 65-66).

Besides this, Bedi draws belaboring comparisons between the conjugal pair of Sunderlal and Lajwanti with that depicted in 'The Ramayana'. The character of Lajo is formed as parallel to that of Sita, both were abducted by the enemy. But, on the other hand, a perceivable contrast can be observed between Sunderlal and Lord Rama where unlike the latter, Sunderlal is courageous enough to accept his rescued wife even after visualizing the opposite.

However, apart of the reiterative connotations of different significations, Lajwanti is above all a fictional documentation of truths as experienced after the partition, the exchange of abducted women (of the same age group and equal sexual prowess) and most importantly the psychological crisis of a woman who is treated kindly by her husband after her rescue. In addition, it takes into consideration the bipolar ideologies exercised by different groups. For example, unlike people such as Sunderlal (Lajwanti's husband) who favours the acceptance of the women who were previously abducted and who sympathizes with their plight, there is a projection of other orthodox groups which practice the opposite viewpoint. According to such conservative people, these women should have committed suicide or poison themselves rather than disgracing their viture or the respectability of their families. In short, abducted women when returned were considered as burdensome for some families during the times of Partition.

Furthermore, the story emphatically examines the forthright objectification of women bodies where they were "treated like cows in a cattle-fair" and where the inhuman dealers "bargained for the

women in the open market" (Bedi 63). This was the tortuous ignominy that was unwillingly relegated to. And finally, Lajwanti is both bewildered as well as shocked when her husband rather than beating her, treats her with compassion. Also, he no longer calls her Lajo but view her as a reincarnated goddess. This relegates her to an extreme subalternic existence where her perpetual silence is constructed by Sunderlal and Lajwanti in turn becomes devoid of articulating her experiential truth, the reality of her personal opprobrium.

The above speechlessness forms the recurring premise of Manto's kafkaesque short story 'Khol Do'. It recounts the silent irony of partition history by providing it with a social dimension. In other words, social histories of women were abruptly undercut by the hegemonic political ones and thus, women voices were lost during the process of decipheration. Along with this, the phallic articulations and enactments were capable of camouflaging the female murmurs thereby rendering the latter as utilitarian assets in the microcosmic patriarchal existence. Critic Veena Das in her work "National Humour and Practical Kinship of Unwanted Women and Children" substantiates writes:

"... bodies of women have to be regarded as signs operating in a masculine discourse in times of disorder. These bodies reveal typography of violence, a territory on which the meaning of partition is inscribed... through the politics of remembering and forgetting" (Das 62).

Manto's 'Khol Do' too features the similar claustrophobia dealing with the past realities accompanied by psychological ruptures of Partition memories. Sirajuddin is haunted by the same memory of his lost daughter Sakina and therefore, aims at taking an epistemological journey to search for her. However, perplexity is heightened to its fullest when the lonesome father is finally able to reach her daughter who lies lifeless on a stretcher and to his amazement, is alive as her hands move towards the drawstring of her shalwar at the Doctor's command of 'Open It'. Thus, Manto assertively deals with Sakina's articulation of silence, the open spaces that are deliberately left vacant for the readers to complete. In addition, the story portrays dichotomous associations and blurred distinctions between the idea of 'us' and 'them'.

This particular aspect can be observed through the ambiguous identity of the rescuers / perpetrators. In other words, the men whom Sirajuddin asks to search for his lost daughter are the same men who although found her out but still appear to continue their undertaken task of searching. Therefore, Manto initiates to dissolve the existing dichotomy between the people residing across the borders thereby aiming to transcend beyond the ongoing communal politics. In short, "violence against women is neither Hindu nor Muslim neither restricted to the moment of frenzy nor unheard of in peacetime. The violation of Sakina is everyday, from the members of her own community to which all women usually surrender in speechless fear." (Chand 3)

Moreover, it can be observed throughout the narrative that the multiple characterizations are of men in the role of fathers, husbands and sons on one hand and rescuers, perpetrators, men carrying the girl on a stretcher and finally a Doctor on the other. But the women (mothers, daughters, wives) exist on the fringes of this masculine world accompanied by an expression of fear, lifelessness and extreme vulnerability. Their passivity renders them helpless in the face of sexual defloration thereby worsening their plight. Also, Sakina's objectification is linguistically asserted by her own father where the latter while providing a description of her daughter uses a repeated epithet that's 'beautiful' with a 'big mole on her right cheek'. In short, similar to Bedi's 'Lajwanti'

Manto's realistic fiction is too fraught with the problematics of Partition and its inevitable effect on women.

Last but not the least, Bhisham Sahni short story 'We Have Arrived in Amritsar' is yet again a demonstrative script which takes into consideration not only the existence of women at the peripheries of the phallic world but more significantly it is an ardent documentation of communal revenge and hatred at the backdrop of cataclysmic events of Partition. Similar to Bedi, Sahni too emphatically aims at highlighting the psychic trauma of its protagonist, in this case a Hindu who along with his family is traveling to Amritsar by train. The main action takes place in a void, an inexplicable space between silence and speech that in turn fractures the least possibility of comprehensiveness. The Pathans try to dissuade a Hindu family with ironically verbal attacks which stoops them to effeminacy. The Hindu passenger though hurt by the demeaning statements but still maintains silence to the core of oppression. Besides this, the woman accompanying the Hindu is speechless, busy with her rosary beads in meditation to the Almighty.

However, as the train approaches Amritsar, there is a declarative obliteration of the previously maintained silence as now the Hindu is destined towards his own land, with which he carries both a physical as well as psychological identification. Or else, now the narrative apart from communal detestation takes into account the significance of territorial affirmation that is capable enough to strengthen the articulatory spirit of the Hindu. But the consequences of the above severely ensnarl the idea of righteousness and vengeance as the heinous enactment of counter violence is meted not on the disrespectful Pathans but on a Muslim family that tries to catch a train from Amritsar Railway Station.

Thus, this struggle between restraint and freedom which the Hindu aims at deciphering through his communal atrociousness irrespective of any personal bias is beyond justification in terms of humanity.

Furthermore, the woman with rosary beads articulates only once throughout the whole story and her statement optimistically concerns the Muslim woman and her child who is beside the man boarding the train. She is compassionate towards that helpless creature as she is totally dependent on her husband but as the outrageous Hindu attacks the Muslim, his wife too is rendered fragile and unconscious right at the station itself. In short, the world of the narrative is that of patriarchy where the female is subservient to her phallic counterpart. Also, not only the protagonist but the author as well is psychologically conscious of the past socio-historical dilemma. He emphatically recalls his experience in the following words:

"When I think back on those days, they seem to be shrouded in mist" (Sahni 147).

This misty partitioned world is completely unsympathetic to the excessive humiliation suffered by the common folk which in turn results in aggressive conversion thereby leading to blurred dichotomies between victimizers and victimized (as in the case of the Hindu protagonist). At the end, there is no rationalized closure similar to the stories of Bedi and Manto. In other words, all the three writers aim at providing an in-between glimpse of the tragic partition reality and it is the interpretation of the readers that will unravel the calamitous truth of its existential beings. Moreover, with precise efficiency these writers are able to comply with the aims and objectives of the Progressive Writers Association. Premchand's inaugural address entitled "The Aim of Literature" sincerely emphasizes the importance of literature that affirms to the writings discussed above. It says "Literature is no longer limited to individualism and egotism, but tends to turn more and more towards the psychological and the social. Now literature does not view the individual as separate from society, on the contrary it sees the individual as an indissoluble part of society!" (Premchand's 9).

In other words, the lives of the characters as portrayed in the stories more than individual are social beings in the fragmented society and their very experiential fate is consciously linked to that of the nation-

state, both ineffectual rotten to the core. Though the evocative moment of partition is historically anthologized as the moment of discovery of a new nation, a nation which is emancipated from the clutches of external domination. However, histories dare not consider the cost at which the freedom was attained and what were its aftermaths. The task of history is only to provide coherently correct names and occurrences but its premises fall short in taking into account the loss that Partition incurred on the common folk especially on socio-psychological levels. It is the progressive writers who have fictively done so.

Altogether, the stories discussed above initiate a spirit of criticality in its readers along with profoundly scrutinizing the customs and institutions that are internalized to its very core. In addition, they also probe into the idea of how the above customs are hollow enough to existentially mutilate the whole idea of conjugal relations, filial bonds and fraternal affinities thereby replacing it with the notion of psychical destabilization, threatening circumstances and bestial vengeance. And female characters or rather caricatures feature as the marginal stereotypes of the so called new world where the idea of their respect and virtue are overshadowed by the political mechanizations of the country. However, justice seems to be a myopic mirage. Manto efficiently pens down "[There] were times when philosophy, argumentation or logic lost their meanings; they were nothing but an exercise in futility" (Manto 101)

Summing up, the aim of the Progressive Writers Movement was to both organize and transform the societal realities that they observed beforehand. However, the solution to the raised interrogations seems farfetched. Even justice seems to be a myopic mirage. Keeping this in mind, Manto efficiently pens down:

"[There] were times when philosophy, argumentation or logic lost their meanings; they were nothing but an exercise in futility" (Manto 101)

This is the time of partition, of up rootedness and the same is substantiated by the Progressive writers of mid twentieth century which includes Bedi, Manto and Sahini.

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