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WOMEN AND ANGUISH: A DISCOURSE DISREGARDED

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Abstract

The social, the personal aspects of Partition – how lives were lost, how women were physically abused, how they coped and rebuilt their lives – are most neglected in history textbooks. Women have traditionally been assigned a place outside history because they are outside the public and the political. It is only by a rupture of the divide between the personal and the political and by demonstrating that as far as women are concerned, the personal is the political, that women can claim and validate the importance of the experiential dimension of any historical event. Herein lies the importance of Partition literature, especially those which centre around women characters.

Keywords: women; partition; violence; border; migration

Six decades after it happened, the magnitude of events which accompanied it, together with their significance for the subcontinent makes the Partition of India an enduringly important and relevant area of study. The Punjab region witnessed the mass migration of around five and a half million Hindus and Sikhs from its western area, and six million Muslims from its eastern area. (Azad 1957:132)The migration to and from East Bengal also involved millions of people, but it occurred episodically, over a longer period. (Bagchi 2003:43) Partition marks a watershed in the lives and consciousnesses of its victims, those who were uprooted and had to settle again, elsewhere. (Bhalla 2006:78)

While reading about Partition one notes an interesting and inexplicable phenomenon — an absence of enquiry into its cultural, psychological and social ramifications.(Chatterjee 2007: 89) There exists however, an interesting body of literature which records, at least partially, the horror of Partition, and is of great importance as the only significant non-official record we have of the time.(Butalia 1998: 58) The tragedy and violence that accompanied Partition and the forced migration engendered by it are the theme of these memoirs, novels and stories.(Hasan 2000:74) On reading any of these narratives one immediately realises that any narrative concerning Partition is also a gendered narrative of displacement, dispossession and violence.(Didur 2006:94) Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Pakistani Bride* traces the life of the young Zaitoon who loses her family in the violence of Partition.(Sidhwa 1998: 56) It is while migrating from one newly born nation to another that the young Zaitoon is orphaned. She is

brought up by a stranger, Qasim, whose ways are alien to her, and who eventually forces her into an incompatible and violent marriage. *Ice-Candy-Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa also narrates the story of the Indian Partition as witnessed by the observant young slightly handicapped daughter of an affluent Parsee family in Lahore.(Sidhwa 1989: 5) Lenny, being neither Hindu nor Muslim, offers an objective point of view with which the violent events following Partition are viewed in the novel. Lenny is particularly attached to her Ayah, a beautiful young woman who attracts a large number of admirers, both Hindus and Muslims. However, after Partition, Ayah is viewed as a woman of the 'other' State, is kidnapped and forced into a nightmarish existence. The novel ends with the return of Ayah to India under the 'recovery of abducted women' scheme. *What the Body Remembers* by Shauna Singh Baldwin, while tracing the course of Roop's life, also traces the history of India from pre Partition to post Partition days, the violence, the rapes, the forced migrations, the honour killings, the bleak struggle filled beginnings of a new life in an unfamiliar, hostile land, which was allotted to one as one's 'own' nation. (Baldwin 1999: 156) All these novels have made women the subject of the story, the agent of the narrative. Attia Hossain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* also focuses on the life of a female protagonist, Laila, a young aristocratic Muslim girl just entering womanhood, and like the two newly formed states struggling to balance modernity and tradition.(Hosain 1988: 68) The fragmentation of culture and tradition all around her raises several questions whose answer she struggles to find. (Hosain 1988:97) *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur presents the life of a young woman, Virmati, against the backdrop of Partition, who struggles with family duties and traditions, educational aspirations and an illicit relationship.(Kapur 1998: 61) Themes of modernity and tradition, religion and inter-religious conflicts, women, their rights and positions in society, are some of the themes dealt with in the novel. Short stories like Bhisham Sahni's "The Train Has Reached Amritsar", Sadat Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh", and, "The Dog of Tetwal", Rajinder Singh Bedi's "Lajwanti", are also relevant in this context as they deal with the themes so important in Partition literature — migration, violence (specifically violence against women), abduction and the recovery of abducted women.(Stewart and Kumar 2008: 6)

Women, during Partition, occupied a centre stage as far as enactments of violence are concerned.(Chadha 2006:97) Many families, while fleeing their erstwhile homelands, killed their own women — wives, mothers and daughters were beheaded, thrown into wells, buried alive in trenches, made to touch live wires, and burnt alive — the reason being that the men of the family were not sure that they would be able to ensure the safety of the women during the long journey into another land.(Khan 2007: 143) The most predictable form of violence experienced by women was of course when women of one community were sexually assaulted by the men of another community, in an attempt to assert their newfound identity, and at the same time a humiliation of the Other by dishonouring their women.(Butalia 1998: 78)

As per available records around 75,000 women were abducted and raped by men across the border. One estimate was that he total number of abducted persons detained in 'foreign' territory was 50,000 Muslim women and children in India and 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan, though many social workers felt that the actual numbers were far greater. Swamped with the complaints of relatives of the "missing" women, the governments of India and Pakistan entered into an Inter Dominion agreement in November 1947 to recover as many women as possible, with maximum possible speed, from each country, and restore them to their families. Following this agreement ordinances were passed in both these countries to cover the years upto December 1949. The Indian Parliament, in the December of that year, legislated an act to facilitate the recovery operations in India.Subsequently,12,552 women and children were said to have been 'recovered' from India, and 6,272 from Pakistan, by December 1949. The figures increased to 20,728 and 9,032 respectively by 1955. (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 70, 99) For a variety of reasons, many abducted women did not want to be returned to their original families and countries. They thought of themselves as 'soiled', feared ostracisation, a substantial number could not accept the fact that they would be uprooted yet again, and be exposed to uncertainty. Many felt secure amidst their new families, in their new identities, in a new country and were thankful for a new beginning.

The violation of women's bodies, followed the attempt at the recovery of those women's bodies – the bodies of its women seem to have become an obsession with the two newly born nations. Why is it so, one may wonder. Women's bodies are an important concern to a nation because they serve as symbols of the fertility of the nation, as vessels for its reproduction, as well as territorial markers.(Chaterjee 1990:112) Hence emerges the need to abduct the women of the 'other', and as its corollary, to recover the abducted women. Women are the 'wombs' of the nation. The rape and violation of women of a particular nation are seen as violation of the nation and an act against the men of the other nation. Nationalist/communalist rape of women is a mode of communication between to opposite groups of men. Women, in a sense, embody the borders and their bodies mark the vulnerability of the borders. (Ivekovic and Mostov: 2004) The value of a woman's body is as a man's possession, as also the repository of future children, especially sons. Since the body constitutes the core of women, and is viewed as the most essential feature of women, it therefore naturally follows that any perception of self is denied to them. The self becomes non-existent. Simone De Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex* opines that:

> "The body of man makes sense in itself, quite apart from that of woman whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself..... Man can think of himself without woman. And she is simply what man decrees, thus she is called 'the sex', by which it means she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being'.(Beauvoir 1997:77)

Down the ages, in patriarchal societies round the world, women's bodies have been looked upon as symbols of honour of the family, the community, and the nation. It subsequently follows that 'defiling' a woman's body is the ultimate revenge that a person/

community/nation can take on the 'other' family/ community/nation in any conflict in society.

During Partition, women were divided between countries, bartered like commodities. They were classified as Hindu, Muslim, Sikh; minor; legitimate or illegitimate; abducted or not; forcibly converted or voluntarily married; and divided between the two countries accordingly. They had no choice whatsoever in the matter – no country was their own, their bodies – treated as valuable commodities – also they could not call their own.

Partition and the upheaval in its aftermath raised certain important questions pertaining to the identity and autonomy of women. Women have always been pawns serving the greater interests of a patriarchal society. Beginning from the ages of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, from Sita and Draupadi, to the modern times of Mukhtaran Mai, the plight of women have not undergone any real change. An increasingly sensitive media, an increasing awareness about the sufferings of women, are resulting in more information about women's lives, their sufferings, coming to light; compelling us to look beyond the veil of silence to recover the memories of those women who were not allowed a voice. Bapsi Sidhwa, in the short story, "Defend Yourself Against Me", summarises the victimisation of women during Partition:

> "I have grown up overhearing fragments of whispered conversations about the sadism and bestiality women were subjected to during Partition: what happened to so and so—someone's sister, daughter, sister-in-law—the women Mrs. Khan categorised as spoils of the war. The fruits of victory in the unremitting chain of wars that is man's relentless history. The vulnerability of mothers, daughters, granddaughters, and their metamorphosis into possessions; living objects on whose soft bodies victors and losers alike vent their wrath, enact fantastic vendettas, celebrate victory".(Cowasjee and Duggal 1995:326)

The social, the personal aspects of Partition – how lives were lost, how women were physically abused, how they coped and rebuilt their lives – are most neglected in history textbooks. Women have traditionally been assigned a place outside history because they are outside the public and the political. It is only by a rupture of the divide between the personal and the political and by demonstrating that as far as women are concerned, the personal is the political, that women can claim and validate the importance of the experiential dimension of any historical event. Herein lies the importance of Partition literature, especially those which centre around women characters. They raise questions about of the people involved, the governments involved; they offer us a glimpse into the unwritten history of the period, an in-depth study of which is essential if Partition, that cataclysmic event which changed the lives of millions, is to be comprehended in its entirety.

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