

Research Article

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN PARTITION FICTION: AN ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

The argument which began in the first part of this series is substantiated by the representation of literary works of several authors like Bapsi Sidhwa, Amrita Pritam, Sadat Hasan Manto, Yashpal and others in this paper. All these are the writers on the Partition and have written in English, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu. Several instances of women lacking any kind of agency and control are exhibited in their works.

Keywords: Partition, Gender, Trauma, Agency, Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

Having analyzed the two frameworks of Gender and Nationalism, I would like to give a few instances of Partition literature where we see these two forces operating in a way that I discussed in the first part of this series. The first novel that I'd like to focus on is Bapsi Sidhwa's (Parsi writer of Indian origin) *Ice Candy Man* (1988) which examines the pre-Partition era in Lahore as an atmosphere of fundamentalism builds up provoked by rigid communal attitudes. What makes it distinct from the other Partition narratives is that it gives the perspective of the Parsi community to show this disastrous event. Bapsi Sidhwa's narrator is a precocious eight-year-old girl Lenny. Sidhwa describes Partition with a detached, objective tone—preachiness or censure. The nation in Sidhwa's novel is symbolized by the 'Hindu' ayah (Governess) of Lenny; whose multi-religious motley group of admirers represents the 'marauders' who can alienate and attack her at any point in the narrative. The Ayah is universally liked and as the news of Partition grows at an alarming rate, the group of Ayah's admirers begins to lessen. With the inevitability of Partition staring them in the face, they are aggressively vocal.

With all due respect malijee, says Ice candy man, surveying the gardener through a blue mist of exhaled smoke, but aren't you Hindu expert at just this kind of thing? Twisting tails behind the scene...and getting someone else to slaughter your goats. [90-91]

The butcher with his poker face says:

Just the English", asks Butcher, "Haven't the Hindus connived with the Angrez to ignore the Muslim league and support a party that didn't win a single seat in the Punjab? It's just the kind of thing we fear. They manipulate one or two Muslims against the interests of the larger community. [92]

In Lenny's words,

One day everybody is themselves—and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Christian. People shrink, dwindling into symbols. Ayah is no longer just my all-encompassing Ayah—she is also a token. A Hindu. [93]

The looting and stealing gangs of the Akalis torture the Muslims of PirPindo (a village in Punjab). The scene of the fragile and helpless 'ayah' being abducted by the hooligans is a poignant one—she is symbolic of a nation being corrupted—a woman whose 'body' is her nemesis. In claiming her body, the hooligans claim the 'Hindu' nation. In the words of Meredith Turshen,

The unpredictability of rape serves to terrorize the community and warn all people of the futility of resistance—those targeted as victims as well as those who might wish to protect the intended targets. Behind the cultural significance of raping 'enemy' women lies the institutionalization of attitudes and practices that regard and treat women as property. (Turshen, p.59)

However, though Sidhwa highlights the vulnerability of women, like nearly all who write on the Partition; Sidhwa's perspective is different in her refusal to make women only victims. Ayah has survived and is rescued by the Godmother. What is important is that Sidhwa foresees the feminist agenda to recognize rape as a war crime. Sidhwa acknowledges the torture that almost always accompanies communal violence but also resolves it with the need to ask for forgiveness and to grant it. Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* is another novel dealing with this idea of the woman as nation. Published as a reprint in 1997, *Pinjar* is the story of Puro, a young Hindu girl full of bright dreams of her future with her betrothed Ram Chander. However, she is abducted by Rashid, belonging to the Muslim community, due to some animosity nursed between the two families for generations. Puro's life turns upside down and she is forced to marry Rashid and becomes Hamida (a Muslim). Puro is a victim of abduction but Pritam redeems her hero and Rashid is acceptable to Puro by the end of the novel. Puro's portrayal is that of a woman who has crossed the boundaries of a Hindu household, taking on a Muslim identity. In this process of transformation, she is portrayed as a resilient being, one who has the courage to defy the world around her and adopt the child of 'pagli' (mad) who is an abandoned woman. Being a Hindu, Pagli's child cannot be with Puro, but she is the only one ready to accept the child and bring him up as her own. Later in the novel, we see Puro's rescuing of Lajo, her brother's wife, who had been abducted by Muslims in the riots. Rashid joins her in this mission and is free of the guilt that he had after marrying Puro. At the end of the novel, Puro does get the opportunity to leave for India for good but she realizes that Rashid's world is now her own world—that she cannot now betray the 'home' she has found with Rashid. Puro is representative of all

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those women who were abducted and married to their abductors, they found their homes and were not ready to get uprooted again. This also disproves the notion that religion defines one's identity. Amrita Pritam is questioning the legitimacy of 'nationhood' and 'nationality' by giving us a woman who stands up to the borders and boundaries that have been set up for her and retains her inner strength. In the violence that marked the partitioning of India, it is now well known that more than 75000 women were raped and tortured. After the Partition, the two states were made aware of the problem of missing women (through reports filed by their communities). They realized its seriousness and set up search committees made of social workers, whose task it was to go into each other's countries to find, 'rescue' and 'recover' abducted women. However, it was the patriarchal state who took decisions on behalf of the women and not the women themselves. Hence, it was the patriarchal state which did not impart any agency to women to make their choices clear to the government. On the Indian side, the operation to bring back abducted women was known as the Central Recovery Operation and it lasted for nearly nine years. When it was fully operational, the main cause for worry was that some of the women who were being recovered were unwilling to go back to the country of their origin. For the women, the recovery was parallel to another dislocation and additionally traumatic experience. They had found roots again and did not want to go back to families who might not accept them because of the stigma. The law (The Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Ordinance) to recover women did not allow them a choice. It was propagated that their return was to their natural 'homeland'—defined as the country of their religion. Yashpal's *Jhootha Sach* [1958-60] written in two volumes called *Vatan aur Desh* (Motherland and Nation) and *Desh ka Bhavishya*, (Future of the Nation) is another example of a fine portrayal of women during the Partition years. Keeping women above such categories and considerations as Hindu-Muslim, rich-poor, literate-illiterate, the author has successfully brought out the predicaments of these women. The novel is full of instances of heartless treatment meted out to the rescued Hindu women. Nobody is willing to accept these ill-fated women, neither their in-laws nor their own parents. Chinti who had come to the refugee camp has been refused shelter by her parents on the pretext that they had married her off and therefore it is up to her in-laws to accept or reject her. One of the rescued women Banto leaves for India from Lahore with the sole purpose of finding her missing infant son. Finally, she finds him in Delhi and begs her in-laws to accept her but they don't budge. Completely heartbroken, Banto beats her head against the threshold of the house and puts an end to her life. Tara too, never considers it necessary to find her relatives because she is convinced that they will not accept her. A common fate of women in the national context is that while they are always seen as responsible for the legacy of the nation to continue, they are also looked at with suspicion. They symbolize a nation's purity but are always seen as property which can be corrupted or stained. They are emblematic of the nation but are also the 'Other'. That is a woman's predicament—that her place i.e., home/nation sometimes instills in her the fear of exile. She has to obey and follow or be excluded.

As Ritu Menon puts it:

'Belonging' for women is also—and uniquely linked to sexuality, honor, chastity, family, community and country must agree on both their acceptability and legitimacy, and their membership within the fold. (Menon, p.89)

These women who were the victims of Partition were doubly oppressed, first for being the victims who have been violated by the enemy and secondly, the patriarchal forces which deny them all agency in the face of conflict.

Analysts like Andrew Parker and Mary Russo have noted that:

Women have been subsumed only symbolically into the national body politic, because no nationalism in the world has ever granted women and men the same privileged access to the resources of the nation-state...Nationalism had a special affinity for male society and together with the concept of respectability, legitimized the dominance of men over women. (Parker, p.6)

The passionate brotherhood of "deep comradeship" that Benedict Anderson (Anderson, p.5) talks about is a brotherhood of men in which women are put on the pedestal as the mother and the trope of nation-as-woman "further secures male-male arrangements and an all-male history." (Menon and Bhasin, p.167) Organizations like the RSS and Akhil Bhartiya Hindu Mahasabha were demanding the recovery of Hindu women and the Hindu Mahasabha even included this fact in its Election Manifesto in 1951.

As Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin put it:

Free choice, freely exercised is what neither state nor community could allow abducted women in post-partition India, so much so that it was legislated out. In its desire to restore normalcy and to assert itself as their protector, the Indian state itself became an abductor by forcibly removing adult women from their homes and transporting them out of their country. It became in effect and in a supreme irony, its hated Other. (Menon and Bhasin, p.125)

Manto's story 'Khol Do' (trans. as 'The Return') is a gruesome picture of rape during Partition. A young girl who has been recovered from India and brought to Lahore by Muslim volunteers is seen on a bed in a hospital. She is in a coma and has been raped so brutally by men from both sides that when the doctor brings her visibly disturbed father in to see if she is the abducted daughter he has been looking for, she undoes the string which holds her salwar in place as she hears the words 'khol do'. She pulls the garment down and opens her thighs. It was only the window in the room that the doctor wanted opened. Her father does not notice but screams with joy 'she is alive, my daughter is alive' (Manto, p.14)

In the words of Sukeshi Kamra, the story

comments on the artificiality of nationalism... and also on the culture of violence and misogyny...it offers a critique of the cultural insistence on the 'purity' of women by offering the image of a father less concerned with his daughter's chastity than with her survival. Finally, it offers Partition as a psychic space that gave play to all of these cultural tropes and repressions. (Kamra, p.136)

The irony is Manto's forte and it comes right across like a slap on the cheek. What is more shameful? The innocent father's joy at the discovery that his daughter is alive or the doctor's shameful discovery that she is obeying his orders as a rape victim and is too traumatized to react in any other way. Partition is visible here in its most sordid form. In another story 'The Dutiful Daughter' by Manto, an old and distraught woman looks in vain for her daughter who has been kidnapped. The girl has, since married the man, a Sikh, who had abducted her. When she sees her mother, she refuses to recognize her for fear of stigma.

In the words of Urvashi Butalia:

Sakina's story [Khol Do] was not uncommon at the time of Partition. But all too often, because women have found it difficult to give voice to such experiences, they have remained

outside the pale of history. Historical silence is compounded by familial silence: these are things that cannot be talked about; tales of heroism can find a place in collective memory but abduction and rape must remain at the margins. (Butalia, p.204)

All these stories are examples of attempts at a gendered reading of Partition and show how the women suffered in the aftermath of Partition. Family, Community and State can be seen as the three dominant forces, which decided the fate of women at an individual and a collective level. Their religious identity and sexuality were also important in the placing of their citizenship. A quote from IsmatChughtai (Indian Muslim woman writer, 1915-1991, wrote primarily in Urdu) comes to mind:

Own country? Of what feather is that bird? And tell me, good people, where does one find it? The place one is born in, that soil which has nurtured us, if that is not our country, can an abode of a few days hope to be it? And then who knows, we could be pushed out of there too, and told to find a new home, a new country. I'm at the end of my life. One last flutter and there'll be no more quarreling about countries. And then, all this uprooting and resettling doesn't even amuse anymore...now you want to pick up and start again. Is it a country or an uncomfortable shoe? If it pinches, exchange it for another! (Chughtaiin Mostov, p.43)

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