

Re-covering Women: Reading Two Partition Stories.

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“Playing British Gods under the ceiling fans of the Faletlis Hotel – behind Queen Victoria’s garden skirt – the Radcliffe Commission deals out Indian cities like a pack of cards A new nation is born. India has been divided after all.” (Sidhwa 140)

The available histories of Partition are often tainted with patriotic bias or discuss political events rather than the experiences of people on the ground. This is perhaps because a nation – state most often sets down its own version of selective history, which is expected to be accepted in order to consolidate and further its collective identity. In such histories voices which challenge or interrogate this meta-narrative are side-lined at best and totally ignored at worst, so that alternative histories and perspectives that might break the selective linearity of the state’s version are institutionally marginalized.

The Radcliffe line which officially came into existence on Aug. 16, 1947 truncated the Indian sub-continent into India and Pakistan on the basis of territory as well as religion. However, this homogeneous division let loose fear, insecurity, religious fury, migration of staggering magnitude in both the communities. Women were abducted, their ‘purity’ lost and their body became a medium on which vengeance was taken, victory celebrated. People in general were infected with the spirit of vendetta committed excess on the women folk of the other community.

On 6th December, 1947 an agreement was made between the governments of India and Pakistan regarding the recovery of abducted women. It was decided that conversions by persons abducted after March 1st, 1947 would not be recognized and all such persons were to be restored to their respective Dominions. It was clearly stated that the wishes of “the persons concerned are irrelevant”.

The question that naturally arises is that ‘do women have a country?’ Are they full fledged citizens of their countries or is their “belonging” always linked to sexuality, honour, chastity, family, community and ultimately nationhood?

The paper seeks to explore these questions with reference to Rajinder Singh Bedi’s *Lajwanti*, translated by the author himself and Amrita Pritam’s *Pinjar*, translated by Khushwant Singh. The voices of abducted women during partition were lost under the dominant ideologies of martyrdom, purity and nationhood. The paper also tries to find out whether such independent female voices can be recuperated through literature.

Both Bharati Ray and Partho Chatterjee have expostulated on the politics of ‘women’s question’ which had always been a central issue of nationalist thought. According to Bharati Ray,

“When the 19th century social reform movement prioritized the ‘woman question’ in its agenda, it abolished the rites of Sati, legalized widow-remarriage, introduced women’s education, but did not interfere ... with the traditional ideology of gender or patriarchal relationships. Even in the new construction of womanhood, it was the conventional image of woman as wife and mother, simply garnished by education and some Victorian womanly, ideals borrowed from the West that was projected as “ideal”, for the “good” Indian woman”. (Ray 6)

Throwing light on the similar discourse of nationalism Partho Chatterjee states that there was a clear distinction between the 'outer world' or the domain of the male and the 'home' or the spiritualised inner space the embodiment of which was the woman. The home was the true spirit of the nation and thus "... its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world ..." (Chatterjee 239). The woman was even 'deified' as the image of the goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside home.

But why is this obsession regarding 'purity' of woman? Is it because she was taken to be representing the 'purity' of the religious community to which she belonged? Was also the burden of national honour laid too heavily on her shoulders? Is it because of this very reason that the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act 1949 denied the abducted women the possibility of asserting their political and civil rights and subjected them to forcible recovery to their respective Dominions?

In India the concern with abducted women went hand in hand with "alarm at forcible conversions." (Menon 51) This preoccupation underlined an important factor in India's relationship with Pakistan: the loss of Hindus to Islam through such conversions, in addition to the loss of territory. Abduction and conversion was "the double blow dealt to the Hindu 'community' so that the recovery of 'their' women, if not land, became a powerful assertion of Hindu manhood." (Menon 51)

Free choice, freely exercised, is what neither nation nor community could allow the abducted women in post-partition India. However, while the state was trying to establish its legitimacy and authority through the Recovery operation and making fervent appeals to the families of these women to accept them; on the communities their ideological inheritance had a powerful bearing. Even the handful of families "broadminded" enough to take back the abducted women, in the vast majority of cases, merely allowed them to live in the household, but did not rehabilitate them in the home in the manner in which they had earlier been a part. It was rather an act of kindness, generosity and sacrifice on the part of those who accepted the recovered women. Even the public appeals made by Gandhi made little impact on the Hindu Society as the belief system was too deeply ingrained and time honored to be discarded because of the exhortations of one man, even though he might be the father of the modern Indian nation. In January 1948, Nehru too made a strong public appeal:

"I am told that there is unwillingness on the part of their relatives to accept those girls and women [who had been abducted] back in their homes. This is most objectionable and wrong attitude to take and any social custom that supports this attitude must be condemned. These girls and women require our tender and loving care and their relatives should be proud to take them back." (Ray 10)

The repeated appeals of Nehru and Gandhi merely indicate the number of families refusing to give up their beliefs was significantly large. Here, as Urvashi Butalia comments,

"For the community, it was women's sexual purity that became important. For the state ... their religious identity was paramount." (Ray 10)

Though the rupture of normal familial arrangements necessitated the State's stepping in as the surrogate pater familias yet as a protector one of the State's principal concerns was with the sexuality of women. This concern was quite explicitly manifested in the case of abducted women whose sexuality was perceived as available for exploitation by a transgressor, and had to be zealously guarded. She was also the upholder of honour, the symbol of sacred motherland, definers of community and national identity. Such attitude perhaps is a glaring demonstration of the Indian State's ambivalence regarding its own identity as secular and democratic. It also harps on the fact that the State was finding it impossible to be free of patriarchal, communal and cultural biases.

Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti* is one of the earliest literary accounts to focus on the social stigma facing abducted women returned to their families and community through the activities of the Recovery Operation.

Set in the Punjab in the town of Ludhiana in the period immediately following partition *Lajwanti* tells the story of Sunder Lal's wife of the same name, who is separated from him during the sectarian violence. *Lajwanti* also refers to a 'touch-me-not plant' that has a unique quality of curling its leaves when touched or brushed, an action seen as indicative of shyness or shame, hence the root 'laaj' which refers to shame. The Rehabilitation Committee in Sunder Lal's Community sings a Punjabi folksong that refers to the *lajwanti* plant as the march through the area, suggesting an analogy between the plant and 'abducted' women. The narrator indicates how the song has a special significance for Sunder Lal:

At early dawn, when Sunder Lal led 'prabhat pheris' through the half-awakened streets, and his friends, Rasalu, Neki Ram and others sang in fervid chorus: 'These are the tender leaves of touch-me-not, my friend; they will shrivel and curl up even if you as much as touch them ...' it was only Sunder Lal whose voice would suddenly choke with ... he would think of his *Lajwanti* whom wanton hands had not only touched but torn away from him ... And as his thoughts wandered in the alley of a sharp and searing pain, his legs would tremble on the hard, cold flag stones of the streets (Bedi 201-2).

It can be argued that Sunder Lal's faltering steps suggest that he has doubts about his own ability to accept *Lajwanti* back if she is found. The song would also appear to have an ambivalent connotation for the Rehabilitation Committee and the community, it is trying to influence; 'abducted' women were seen as 'polluted' and the ambivalent interpretation of *lajwanti*'s curling action resonates with the community's ambiguous response to the return of the women. Although the community seemed to respond well to other 'rehabilitation' activities, yet there was this problem regarding 'Rehabilitate them in your hearts!' The narrator himself says that this programme was, staunchly opposed by the inmates of the temple and the orthodox conventional people who lived in the vicinity.

Could the folksong, therefore, be construed as referring to the consequences of having one's honour defiled? It does resonate with the response of many people in the community who rejected the women once they returned:

For a long moment the abducted women and their relatives stared at each other like strangers. Then heads bent low, they walked back together to tackle the task of bringing new life to ruined homes ... But there were some amongst these abducted women whom their husbands, fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters refused to recognize. On the contrary, they would curse them! Why did they not die? Why did they not take poison to save their chastity? ... They were cowards who basely and desperately clung to life.' (Bedi 204-5)

In this context could the folk song then be read as suggesting that 'abducted women should shrivel up in the face of their pollution? The survival and return of these women to the community casts aspersions on their virtue and honour as it is defined by patriarchal codes and challenges expectations concerning women's sexual passivity outside the domestic sphere.

Public exercises of national unity in the civil sphere – a key feature of nationalists thought from its inception in the early nineteenth century are mimicked by the narrator's journalistic account of how the local 'rehabilitation committee' is established. Ceremoniously the narrator states how: "Babu Sunder Lal was elected Secretary of this committee, by a majority of eleven votes ... Their confidence rested perhaps on the fact that Sunder Lal's own wife had been abducted ..."

The disciplinary effect of enrolling Sunder Lal and other community members in the rehabilitation committee is seen in the transformation of Sunder Lal's attitude concerning

domestic abuse. Bedi is at pains to make it known that the pre-partition power relation between Sunder Lal and Lajwanti was characterized by a constant reassertion of Sunder Lal's physical and institutional dominance over her as her husband. The narrative discloses that now when Sunder Lal thinks about how he has physically abused Lajwanti in the past, he is ashamed:

“...For once, if only once, I get my Lajo back, I shall enshrine her always in my heart. I shall tell others that these poor women were blameless, that it was no fault of theirs to have been abducted, a prey to the brutal passion of rioters. The society which does not accept these innocent women is rotten and deserves to be destroyed (Bedi 203- 4).

His remonstrations disclose a discursive intersection between his sense of emasculation and his view of 'abducted' women as passive victims of the other. His repentance is genuine but what kind of 'acceptance' is he going to provide his Lajo with? Is he capable of rehabilitating her in the same space of domestic sphere before she had been abducted? His dilemma becomes evident when he hears the news of Lajwanti's recovery: "Sunder Lal shivered with a strange fear and felt warmed by the holy fire of his love" (Bedi 209).

The precariousness of the process of recasting women's identities in post-partition India is made visible by the narrative's focus on the reconfiguration of the power relation between Lajwanti and Sunder Lal when she is returned to him. On the one hand Lajwanti is represented as being aware of her patriarchal patronage in order to survive in the community when she expresses her fear about how Sunder Lal's will react to her sexual 'contamination'. On the other Sunder Lal's reception of Lajwanti is torn between his negative reaction to her 'healthiness' and 'well being' (suggesting that she may not have been as much of a 'victim' of the other man as he would like to think) and the 'new' pressures on his behaviour as a (male) citizen in the modern nation state to welcome her back as his wife. Though Lajwanti is described as 'inebriated with an unknown joy' (Bedi 213) when she is first returned to her home (Sunder Lal neither rejects nor beats her). She comes to understand that his acceptance of her is in exchange for her silence and performance according to the demands of patriarchy.

Sunder Lal addresses Lajwanti as 'devi' or goddess placing her identity, agency and everyday experiences with the other community under erasure. While he places the 'blame' for the stigma attached to Lajwanti's honour on social conventions, he also invalidates her potential to resist those conventions. The narrative suggests therefore, that the ambivalent terms of Lajwanti's reintegration into the community and nation state require her to surrender her identity as a woman who can question her husband or renegotiate the terms of her patriarchal patronage.

In stark contrast to Lajwanti we have Amrita Pritam's Pooro who defies patriarchal and territorial boundaries, effectively using her agency to critique the reality of partition by choosing to stay in Pakistan.

A victim of cross-religious abduction Pooro succeeds in escaping from the clutches of Rashida, her abductor, only to fall into the abyss of rejection from her parents:

You have lost your faith and birthright. If we dare to help you, we will be wiped out without a trace of blood left behind to tell of our fate.(Singh 16)

It is perhaps this refusal of her family to accept her back that helps to surface the voice of resistance lying latest inside her:

When she had come this way earlier, she had believed she was returning to life; she had wanted to live again, to be with her mother and father. She had come full of hope. Now she had no hope, nor any fear. . (Singh 16)

Does rejection from her family make her succumb to marriage with Rashida? Or is it Pooro's way of protesting against her parents and the Hindu community who brutally close their doors on her?

After marriage, Pooro initially regards her body as 'unclean', in keeping with the codes of 'purity' of her religion. Her anguish is inconsolable when she discovers that she is carrying her abductor turned husband's child:

If only she could take the worm out of her womb and fling it away! Pick it out with her nails as if it were a thorn / pluck it off as if it were a maggot or a leech ...! (Singh 1)

Pooro's anguished soul is all alone in its suffering and the painful transformation arises out of this affliction is consummated with the tattooing of her new name on her forearm – she is rechristened 'Hamida'. Now, she is Pooro only in her dreams and in her reminiscences of her parent's home. This duality she cannot take affably to and is soon reduced to mere skin and bones: "It was a double life: Hamida by day, Pooro by night. In reality, she was neither one nor the other; she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name." (Singh 17-18)

The birth of her soon, Javed, is a turning point in Pooro's life. She is forced to analyze her emotions and the change in them with time: "Out of this conflict of hate and love, love and hate, were born Hamida's son and Hamida's love for her husband." (Singh 25)

Though she remains scarred, Pooro (renamed Hamida) comes to accept her new identity, and prosper in a provisional; post traumatic sort of way.

Communal discord consequent to the partition of India rises to an unprecedented degree of severity and the horror of the cataclysmal onset of the partition riots becomes unbelievable. The world in the novel emerges from a simple past into a violent complex present and the novelist here seeks to chart the effect of that shift on the individual and society. We are told how furious Pooro, now Hamida, was every time she heard of the abduction of Hindu girls by Muslims and of Muslim girls by Hindus for none of these abducted girls would now have any place to go back to. They would be derelicts at the mercy of their abductors. On hearing from Ramchand, the man with whom her marriage had initially been fixed by her family, that one such woman was his sister Lajo, now her brother's wife, Pooro cannot help herself from pleading with Rashid to help her locate the girl. Together they are successful in locating Lajo, kept confined in her own family home at Rattoval by a Muslim man. However, Pooro, (now Hamida) cannot contain her agitation when Rashid informs her of the Government Proclamation ordering people to hand over all abducted persons, so that they could be exchanged for other similarly abducted by Indians. Parents had been exhorted to receive back their abducted daughters. A sense of resentment surges through her mind:

When it had happened to her, religion had become an insurmountable obstacle; neither her parents nor her in-laws to be had been willing to accept her. And now the same religion had become so accommodating! (Singh 67)

It is perhaps this resentment which is at the root of the resistance shown by her at the end of the novel. She hands over Lajo to Ramchand and her own brother. It is then that her brother urges her to return with them to India: "Pooro! ... This is your last chance ..." (Singh 84)

Even Pooro herself knew that she just had to declare that she was a Hindu. It is at this moment that she exercises her choice, challenging the national obsession with borders: "My home is now in Pakistan."

Pooro thus, makes the non-normative choice to refuse the offer of inclusion and interpolation into family, community, nation that was once denied to her. In doing so, she recreates her own identity, 'Hamida', which had once been thrust upon her. She also creates new spaces for those abducted women for whom relocation would be synonymous with uprooting for the second time.

Though the paper focuses on the trauma of abducted women, yet it cannot avoid observing that abduction was a problem which affected both men and women. Was this the result of the incompatible goals that the community and state had set out to achieve through their participation in the Recovery Operation? On one hand there were the age old customs of

the patriarchy while on the other hand was the State's desperate attempt to establish the legitimacy of its nationalist, secular imaginary by eliding the emphasis on women's 'sexual purity' as a symbol of community honour. Men were baffled by these conflicting goals, not knowing how to relocate their womenfolk in the domestic sphere. As a result the hapless women (Should we say the *Sitas* of modern times?) continued to give their Agni-pariksha while the conflict remained unresolved.

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