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Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti*: A Gendered Experience of Partition Violence

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Abstract:

The partition of India in 1947 was a bloody phenomenon. It was marked with communal murders, lootings, mass abductions, forced marriages and rapes. Being the most vulnerable section of the society the worst sufferers of this turmoil were women. The present paper seeks to analyze Rajinder Singh Bedi's story, '*Lajwanti*' for its representation of the gender based ethnic violence being inflicted upon women during the partition and the post-partition era by the essentially patriarchal institutions of family, community and nation. We would try to delineate how the forces of communalism and patriarchy worked together to push the women against the double yoked gendered and communal violence.

Keywords: Honor, Women, Partition, Violence, Gender.

The partition of India (in 1947) divided India into two independent nations (India and Pakistan). The partition was followed by mass lootings and genocide. Heinous crimes were committed against women. Several women were abducted, raped, murdered and forced into marriages. Being vulnerable, they become easy targets of the horrific communal violence and their bodies became the sites over which vengeance was claimed. The abducted women who survived the unspeakable horror of sexual violence suffered throughout their lives. The governments of both countries took these abductions seriously. On 6th Dec, 1947 an agreement was signed between the government of India and Pakistan regarding the recovery of abducted women. It was decided that forced marriages and conversions during partition will not be acknowledged and the governments shall make every possible effort to locate, recover and rehabilitate the abducted women to their respective domains. Due to this policy of the state, the abducted women were again uprooted from their new homes. Fearing that they will not be accepted by their families, many women wished to stay back. But they were forcibly recovered

by the state machinery and sent back to their respective families as it had been written in the law that the equal number of abducted women shall be exchanged by both nations.

Those women were conspicuously left out without any voice or choice. This law itself seems to reflect patriarchal ideology as it denied the women any right to choose their own religion and nation. Undoubtedly, the abduction of those women was an act of crime against them but their forcible recovery by the state (enacted in the name of honor, which forced them to live a life of marginalization for the rest of their lives) was also an act of violence against them. They were again uprooted against their will. Thus, woman is not only the 'inferior sex' but also is an inferior citizen in free India (Nanda 104). Their fears proved true. Many families refused to accept and even recognize those women. Some people even said that "they should have killed themselves to preserve their honor and virtue". (Bedi 58) The handful of families 'broadminded enough to take back abducted women merely allowed them to live in their houses, but did not accept them. It was rather an act of kindness, generosity and sacrifice on the part of those who accepted the recovered women. (Dasgupta and Roy 2). Though those women were rehabilitated but they were never fully accepted in their families.

Rajinder Singh Bedi's '*Lajwanti*' not only talks about the sexual violence faced by women at the hands of men of other communities but also unveils the torment that the recovered women had to suffer at the hands of their own families, communities and nations as well. Being focused upon the psycho spiritual trauma of the recovered women, the narrative explores the issues of women's body, identity and sexuality during the period of partition and post-partition era. The present paper aims to delineate the gendered nature of partition violence which was inflicted upon women by not only the men of rival communities but also by their own families and communities. Focusing upon the manner in which the partition of India affected the lives of women, the present paper tries to explore the extremely traumatic experience of women caught between the double yoked violence of communal hatred on one hand and patriarchy on the other.

'*Lajwanti*' recounts the story of a young couple Sunder Lal and his wife Lajwanti (a shy timid girl as her name symbolizes). During partition Lajwanti is abducted by a Muslim whereas her husband Sunderlal somehow manages to reach eastern Punjab. After partition, frantic efforts were made by the government of both countries to recover the abducted women. Many rehabilitation committees were constituted to resettle the refugees and to rehabilitate the

abducted women. When Sunderlal was being elected the president of one such committee, he strongly advocated the open-hearted welcome of the abducted women in their respective households. He raised slogans like, "Honor them. Give them a place in your heart." (21) He even argued with the orthodox priest of the temple Narain Baba. Criticizing people who have refused "to accept or even recognize these women" (58), he pledged that if Lajwanti would return he would enshrine her. But as soon as he learnt the news of Lajwanti's return, his behavior changed abruptly. He felt annoyed at her Muslim attire and comparatively better health. Sunderlal was startled to observe that she had been well treated in Pakistan as she looked healthier her complexion looked clearer, eyes brighter and she had put on some weight as well. He had believed that suffering and sorrow would have reduced her to a mere skeleton." (64)

Ironically, he failed to read the signs of pain and humiliation on her face. (64) Sunderlal who used to preach other people to be liberal, proved out to be a typical patriarchal subject. To set an example, Sunderlal brought her home and with most reverence, treated her like a goddess. But he does not accept her as his wife thus denying her all the conjugal rights. Lajwanti wishes to tell him what she had suffered in Pakistan. But he does not even allow her to speak about it. The story ends with Lajo coming to the conclusion that she had been rehabilitated but not "accepted ". She realizes that she can never become the person she once was.

'Lajwanti' unveils two distinct dimensions of violence against women. The first one is the sexual violence inflicted upon women by the men of other community. Second is the psycho-spiritual violence, the insult and rejection faced by the women at the hands of their own families. The two types of violence may seem different, but the factors lurking behind them are the same. It is the narrative of patriarchy which works behind the plight of women. The marital relationship of Sunderlal and Lajwanti is a perfect example of the unjust power division in our social order. The regular thrashings of Lajwanti at the hands of her husband and Lajwanti's acceptance of these beatings as a normal phenomenon shows how the patriarchal system conditions its subjects to accept their respective 'inferior' and 'superior' position in society as natural. Sunderlal on the other hand takes pride in this sheer brutality perceiving this shameful act as the manifestation of his manhood.

The sexual violence against women erupted from the patriarchal ideology where women are seen as the less important marginalized 'other' and the men as the more important centralized

'subject'. In a patriarchal society, the men in power are the ones who make rules shaping and controlling their identity, subjectivity, personality and even sexuality. Doing so, they create an anti-women narrative of honor which further led to the exploitation of women. The phenomenon of attaching the honor of the family or community with the female body is yet another dimension of that narrative. The very process (of attaching honor of a family, community or nation to the female body) strips women off their subjectivity, individuality and assigned them strictly their respective gendered roles. It results in the artificial installment of honor in a woman, who herself is merely an emblem. In this situation, the female body becomes a battleground, an area where victory is sought, "Women bear the brunt of communal hostility for as Reena Mitra argues," it is in the heaping of indignities on women that the power game of rival men in societies lies".(104) 'Lajwanti' calls in question the very phenomenon of attaching honor of the community or family with the physical chastity of women. This logic makes the women more prone to the sexual violence during riots. Deepti Misri in her book 'Beyond Partition' explains this phenomenon in these words:

"Female bodies as reproducers and boundaries of community, become the repositories of community honor. Accordingly, sexually savagery before killing in communal riot is paradigmatic manifestation of that logic. "(38)

The act of rape becomes equivalent to the act of robbing the honor and soiling the pride of the other community: "In penetrating the girl, the abductor would deplete the honor and therefore the masculinity of the other community and enhance his own accordingly".(Misri 39) Defying and converting a woman thus acquires a symbolic significance, that of corrupting the core of the community. It is the reason behind the reluctance in accepting a polluted woman back in the family. Because that woman not only is rendered sexually impure but is a persisting reminder of the failure and humiliation of the patriarchal family and community. The same logic 'deplete the honor' worked behind the sexual savagery against women on both sides of border. 'Lajwanti' like other abducted women became victim of this framed narrative of honor. She was abducted by a Muslim named Jumma and was forced to live with him.

The narrative moves further and throws light upon the rejection and humiliation faced by the abducted women at the hands of their families after being recovered and reaching their respective homes. Even their family members refused to recognize them: "One woman saw her

brother and cried, “O Bihari, even you refuse to recognize me? You played in my lap as a baby!”(58)Many people questioned even their right to live, “why didn’t they take poison to preserve their virtue and honor?”. They called them “cowards, clinging to their live! Thousands of women in the past killed themselves to save their chastity!” (58). It implies the fact that a large number of women were killed or forced into death by their own families in order to preserve the honor of community and family. Bedi throws light upon the position of sexuality of a woman in a patriarchal society (Khanna 23) which gets reflected in the mutual conversation between the volunteers working on the border for the rehabilitation of the abducted women, “Our chaps said that the women they were handling over were old or middle aged and of little use. One volunteer snatched Lajo’s dupatta and said, “Would you describe her as an old woman? Take a good look at herIs there any amongst those you have given us who could measure up to her?” (61)

Nobody asked those women whether they really wanted to return or not. It seems as if in this world of men, women are mere entities, lifeless things. They are always treated as less than human. They are mere bodies who can be abducted, abused, tortured and then returned back where they belonged to. Nobody is bothered about their inner trauma. In this way, the state proves to be a patriarchal instrument which forced itself upon the women as much as the abductors had. Urvashi Butalia recounts this traumatic experience in her book. ‘The Other Side of Silence’ in these words:

"The women as a person did not count, her wishes were of little consequence, she had no right to resist, defy nor even to appeal, for the act denied even that basic freedom. Not only was she to be forcibly recovered, but if she disputed her recovery, she was (after 1954) allowed to put her case, before a tribunal, but beyond that if her the tribunals findings were seen as unjust she had no recourse".
(191)

‘Lajwanti’ seems to unveil the hypocrisy of the patriarchal society which on one hand worships women as deities and considers them as a symbol of the familial honor but if some misfortune befalls upon them, it abandons them to suffer alone. The logic of honor seems to be responsible for the plight of the abducted women who returned. According to the men of their

families those women could not be accepted because they have become impure after being defiled by the men of other community.

Some people like Sunderlal who proved kind enough to take them back even they could never accept those women in true sense. Sunderlal who used to preach other men to accept the abducted women is completely shocked to learn about the return of his wife. The very experience of confronting Lajwanti has been profoundly disturbing for him, "being shivered with a strange fear, "he feels disturbed by her "healthiness "and "wellbeing". They return home and Lajwanti wants to tell her husband everything that she had gone through. But Sunderlal forbids her to discuss about her past. This silence torments Lajwanti badly. The patriarchal society accepts the sexually violated woman in its own terms and not as before. It suppresses her painful past behind a silence, under the pretext that the only way of dealing with the painful past is through suppression and erasure of the memory. It demonstrates how the very act of rape and abduction has changed the dynamics of marital relationship between Sunderlal and Lajwanti. Sunderlal elevates Lajo to the status of a "devi", therefore, distancing himself from her at an emotional and sexual level. She feels like a stranger in her house. She becomes an untouchable after being soiled by the touch of the "other". For Sunderlal, Lajjo ceases to be a human being with emotions and desires. He elevates her to the heights of a goddess and in turn denies her all the conjugal rights. Lajwanti realizes that her abduction has irrevocably changed her relationship with her husband. She feels that she could never achieve her old position in her house as well as in her husband's life. She feels that she can only be rehabilitated as a goddess but never as a woman who has been a victim of sexual abuse. She realizes that "she would never be Lajo again" (66). She feels that she had returned home but she had lost everything (66). The story ends with Lajo's realization of rootlessness, alienation and a sense of loss of identity.

Drawing an analogy between the story of 'Ramayana and Lajwanti, Bedi seems to point out that even after centuries the attitude of the patriarchal society towards abducted women has not yet changed. Like Sita, Lajwanti was also forcibly abducted, she too had to live with her abductor against her own will. After her return, she also faced trauma, insult and rejection by her own husband. According to Ramayana, Rama kills Raavana and liberates his wife who had been forcibly abducted by the latter. But Rama clearly tells her that he has recovered her only to restore the honor of his family and he would not take her back as his wife. Only after proving her

chastity in fire he takes her back. But shortly after his return to Ayodhya, he abandons Sita and banishes her in the forest. Sita was exiled by her husband in the forest whereas Lajwanti suffered a psychological exile even in her own house as her husband who by enshrining her as a Devi thus rejected her as a wife.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that 'Lajwanti' is a tragic tale of anguish, sense of loss and trauma which serves to deepen our understanding of women's experiences of partition. The patriarchal stereotyping of female body as 'pure' rendered them more vulnerable and they fell prey to the violence committed against them by not only the men of other community (who raped and abducted them) but also by the male members of their own family who forced them to commit suicide and emotionally tormented them by not accepting them even after being rehabilitated. This story highlights the psychological trauma of women who had lost their home, family, identity along with their chastity. It heaves a sigh for those unfortunate women who being trapped between the double yoked violence of patriarchy and communalism suffered for no mistake of their own.

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