

Sufferance of Women in Parition Novels

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ABSTRACT

"The tragedies of partition would not have been complete had they not been accompanied as every conflict since the dawn of history, by an outpouring of sexual savagery." In India where the Almighty is worshipped in feminine form as "Shakti" by many, crimes against women such as torture, rape, deliberate mutilation, parading naked in streets, were commonplace during partition. The present paper is an attempt to bring out the atrocities on women and the treatment to which they were subsequently subjected. Poor, innocent young girls, married women-sometimes with infants in their arms-were forcibly taken away, battered, raped, and passed on from man to man, or sold like cheap chattel.

Keywords: Partition, assault, feminine, sexual, captivity, perversity, traumatized, sadistic pleasure

I. INTRODUCTION

"The tragedies of partition would not have been complete had they not been accompanied as every conflict since the dawn of history, by an outpouring of sexual savagery." The present paper is an attempt to analyse how in India where the Almighty is worshipped in feminine form as "Shakti" by many, crimes against women such as torture, rape, deliberate mutilation, parading naked in streets, were commonplace during partition. The atrocities on women and the treatment to which they were subsequently subjected constitute a sordid chapter in the history of human relations. Poor, innocent young girls, married women-sometimes with infants in their arms-were forcibly taken away, battered, raped, and passed on from man to man, or sold like cheap chattel. Another way of terrorizing and humiliating men was to dishonour their women- the final insult. In fact the frenzy during partition assumed sexual connotations.

Chaman Nahal gives us a detailed description of what happened to women during partition. Many women were kidnapped and forcibly confined in captivity; some were subjected to mass rape, at times in public places and in the presence of large gatherings. In some cases, the rape was followed by atrocities such as chopping off the breasts and painful death. "Many of the pregnant women had their wombs torn open. The survivors were retained for repeated rapes and humiliations, until they were parceled out to decrepit wrecks-the aged, the left overs who could not find a wife, or those Muslims who wanted an additional wife". During attacks on the convoys of the refugees, the Muslim mob disappear on horses carrying a number of young girls with them. In another attack, Chandni is taken forcibly away and when her mother Padmini resists, she is knocked out with a stick and is dishonoured while she lies unconscious. When some abducted women are discovered and brought back to the camp, their families are not overjoyed at the reunion. On the contrary, "some seemed sorry the girls had come back at all, soiled and dishonoured" (Azadi, 319). It sheds light on the mind set which holds virginity to be more important than saving the life of an unfortunate girl.

Nahal highlights another perversity: people unabashedly enjoy the parade of naked abducted woman in Narowal. This scene is seen through the consciousness of Arun (who is shocked) and Suraj (who enjoys it). Arun and Suraj Parkash buy paan and prepare to see the procession of about forty naked women between sixteen to thirty years of age. The bruises on their bodies indicate that they had been beaten. "Their masters walked beside them and if any of the women sagged or hung behind, they prodded her along with the whips they carried" (Azadi, 296). Suraj Parkash thoroughly enjoys the scene and as the women come nearer, he prods Arun in the ribs in glee. But increasingly "he became too engrossed to pass on his excitement to Arun and stood staring, forgetting Arun. Afterwards he wants to have a drink to prolong his excitement and his face looks ecstatic to Arun" (Azadi, 299). Looked at from another point of view, parading naked women of all ages and at times even spitting at them is an expression of hatred for the other community. Sexual violence thus becomes an instrument of the ultimate insult. There is another story of rape in the novel which seems to celebrate heroism. During the last attack on the convoy camping at Narowal, Capt. Rahmat Ullah takes Sunanda forcibly away and molests her. Arun, running through

the fields to save his life, comes to the farm house where Rahmat Ullah is dishonouring Sunanda, confronts and eventually kills the villain and takes Sunanda back to the Camp.

Kartar Singh Duggal suggests that while large scale violence was being organized and Muslims were given instructions about wiping out Hindus, Sikhs, their property, and their children, "only the Pothoar women of the Hindus and Sikhs brought up on milk and butter were not to be touched-- they were the glory of Pothoar. Duggal, apart from portraying scenes of violence of women, also traces the reasons for such treatment meted out to them. Once Lakhu had tried to misbehave with Prito, the daughter of Shamoo. The Sikhs of the village thrashed and hung him upside down. Since then Lakhu kept away from the locality. But, when planned violence broke out, Lakhu, a shining hatchet in hand, "pounced upon" the house of Shamoo along with his gang. They tie Shamoo and his wife to the trunk of a tree, rape and kill Prito as well as her five sisters. Thus for taking revenge, Lakhu takes the help of other rioters and gives vent to his hidden fury. Duggal portrays the sadistic pleasure that the aggressors derive from the rape, highlighting the cruelty with which they treat the victims and their families. Harnam Das, an unfortunate father, is traumatized for life when he sees his own daughter stripped naked, made to dance, and paraded in a procession through the village. "Long Live Pakistan" is tattooed on her breasts with a crescent and a star on her forehead (Twice Born, 56). Harnam Das tells the refugees that when the seventh goonda was raping her, he fainted. Whenever he recounts the story, he faints.

The tale of Sita makes one shudder. A Brahmin by birth, Sita had been separated from her parents who had migrated to India. At first they could not be traced. When they were ultimately traced, a number of letters and telegrams had to be sent. Eventually when the father did turn up, seeing "the swollen belly of his daughter, the old man lost his temper completely. He refused to accept her and abused her heartlessly. In his opinion she was better dead" (Twice Born, 159). Ultimately he abandons her to her fate. What Duggal seems to suggest is that not only strangers but even their own people were cruel to these unfortunate women. The phenomenon indicates the feudal system in which women were considered not only inferior but were also subjected to a code which was designed by men and was not applicable to men. What happened to women during partition reveals the middle-class mentality of Indians. The very rich or the very poor have no moral qualms regarding sex. But to the middle-class mind, virginity of a girl is very important. No wonder so many abducted women refused to return to their homes because of the fear of being rejected by their parents and society at large. History proved them right when some parents refused to accept their dishonoured daughters into the fold.

Masroor in 'Shadows of Times' shows that women are vulnerable victims of men's desires no matter what the times are. Shanti is one such unfortunate victim. As she returns from watching a film along with her adopted brother. Arun, she senses that they are being followed. Soon two men overtake them, one holds Arun against the wall and the other pulls Shanti down and rapes her. She is brutally knocked down again when men change places. The helpless brother watches his sister being dishonoured as a mute witness. The impact of the rape is so powerful that Shanti decides never to get married. In That Migration, Wadhwa repeats the story of Hindu and Sikh women stripped naked and paraded through a village in Pakistan. In a sudden twist, The Dark Dancer depicts a Muslim who poses to be a Brahmin and attacks Krishnan while travelling in a train. Apparently his wife had been raped and killed while he had helplessly watched the spectacle till he could do so no more. The desire for revenge ravages his psyche and he wants to kill as many Hindus as he can. Soon the train is stopped by a mob and one of the Sikhs kills this Muslim. In the course of the story, we come to know that the Sikh's wife had been raped and butchered and this is what has set him on the path of violence which seems to spread like fire. The underlying suggestion is that while one community tried to insult the other community by violating the honour of their women, a chain reaction of raping and murdering started but the people did not know how to come out of this senseless and futile cycle of pain.

In 'Ice Candy Man, the chocolate brown eighteen year old "edible" Ayah, the symbol of the unity of Mother India, the symbol of womanhood, is abducted by goondas who come to Lenny's house to capture the Hindus. The most shocking part that had sexual is that the Ice Candy Man - her admirer and lover with whom she has had sexual intimacy--is one of the hooligans. In the frenzy of excitement, he participates in her abduction and is a party to outraging her honour. Ruthlessly the men drag the Ayah out, her arms stretched and her feet bare, her sari off her shoulders, her clothes torn. They "drag her in grotesque strides to the cart and their harsh hands, supporting her with careless intimacy lift her into it. Four men stand pressed against her, propping her body upright, their lips stretched in triumphant grimaces." Months later, the Ayah is found to have become a dancing girl in Heera Mandi. No abduction in the partition novel is so intense, terrifying, and unforgettable. The whole of womanhood seems to have been humiliated, mutilated, and scarred for ever.

In his new role as a pimp, the Ice Candy Man loads her with gold and silver, apologises for the past, and marries the Ayah but she cannot be the same again. The chant of Lenny and other children "Ayah! Ayah! Ayah! Ayah!" joined by the women beating their breasts on the roof, "Hai, Hai, Hai, Hai" reflects "the history of their

cumulative sorrows and the sorrows of their Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Rajput great-grandmothers who burnt themselves alive rather than surrender their honour to the invading hordes besieging their ancestral fortresses" (Ice Candy Man, 273-74). Indian women put honour before their life and in times of crisis, their honour becomes the index of their vulnerability. This is well brought out by Bapsi Sidhwa who is able to transmute individual experience into universal tragedy. What happens to Ayah can happen to any woman in similar circumstances.

In her novel *Pinjar*, Amrita Pritam also takes up the cause of the suffering of women in India and shows how badly women were treated not only during the partition but even earlier. The whole drama is enacted and seen through the consciousness of its central character, Pooro, a victim of revenge avowed to be taken two generations earlier. Rashida's paternal aunt was abducted and kept by force by Pooro's eldest paternal uncle when her grandfather was still alive. Now Pooro is engaged to be married and hectic preparations are being made for the wedding day. Just a few days before the marriage ceremony, Rashida is incited by his uncles to take revenge and abduct Pooro who is unfortunately not only a victim of abduction but also of the feudal values prevalent at that time. This she discovers when after fifteen days' imprisonment, she runs away from Rashida's place and knocks at the door of her parents home. She is not accepted by them because they assumed that she had lost her honour. She is directed to go away because of their collective fear of the wrath of the Sheikhs.

Pooro is both a victim and a witness of partition. She hears of people being killed, houses being looted and burnt, girls abducted, raped, and paraded naked. One evening she finds a young girl in the sugarcane fields who tells her that they had been waiting in the camps to be taken to India. At night the Muslims come and take away the young girls and bring them back in the morning. This has been happening to her also for the last nine nights. Pooro understands her pain and escorts her to the camp at the opportune moment. In the camp she meets Ram Chand to whom she was engaged before her abduction and to her horror finds that his sister, Lajo who is now married to Pooro's brother has been abducted by the Muslims. The rest of the story narrates how she recovers Lajo and gets her sent to India. Amrita Pritam's focus remains not on facts and dates but on the suffering and the agony of separation. The reader can identify not only with the suffering of women during partition but also with similar patterns of the atrocities and suffering of women since time immemorial.

Mohan Kahlon explores the theme of suffering in his novel *Pardesi Rukh* (undated) how women faced terrible humiliations, what happened to those dishonoured creatures, and what kind of life they were forced to live. Kahlon brings out the irony of the situation that rape was not the ultimate tragedy which happened but its consequences were far worse and far reaching. The policeman Charna is supposed to be on official duty in Kalanor and his job at the time is to help small caravans reach safely upto a certain fixed point. He collects a group of like-minded fellows and starts looting the caravans. Not only that, they capture and rape the girls. Seema is one such unfortunate girl who is physically abused, beaten up, threatened with weapons, and subjected to mass rape. Kahlon describes the terrifying scene thus: "And then the black, gray, unshaven, half shaved beards would bristle on Seema's neck. Her open and dishevelled hair was tasted by several mouths. Seema's other sisters and members of the family come out and watch the scene. Charna takes off her dress and with a sharp knife cuts downwards the top half of her dress, drawing a line of blood from her bust down. As the act shows utter debasement, it is at once suggestive of the bloody Partition of the country and the way mother earth is ravaged. Later the looters want equal distribution of the booty and unfortunately, Seema is the only girl to be shared. Along with the loot, her price is also fixed. Such diabolical treatment amply suggests the debased condition of women in a feudal set up. She has no identity of her own and is merely a thing to be used in whichever way her masters like until she is discarded.

On the whole, writers have effectively and pointedly underlined the bestiality of human mind when social constraints are disturbed in times of crisis. The virginity of girls is so important to parents that it forces them to take their own lives or parents push them into the wells when hope of saving their honour is lost. Daljeet loses his two sisters thus. When he is journeying towards India, women are raped and killed even in the camps. Daljeet mentions one such woman who had slept at night and in the morning was found naked "drenched in her own blood., Even his beloved, Channi, is taken away by the military personnel guarding the caravan at night and released in the morning. The turmoil, the heartache, sense of loss, mental in the mahe helplessness of fleeing people haunted by fear are vividly captured by Sukhbir. Despite the dehumanization all around, the stream of life continues with life reasserting itself in various forms.

Nanak Singh's novel revolves around young girls raped, abducted, and paraded stark naked by the Muslims of Rawalpindi Satnam sees an eighteen-year-old Muslim girl being paraded naked and taken towards the Gurdwara Committee (Aag Di Khed, 22). Although Nanak Singh writes about rapes and parades, he does not throw light on such ruthless behaviour and why people were reduced to the level of such behaviour. In fact both 'Khooon de Sohle' and 'Agg Di Khed' seem to be written like an elegy mourning the death of the unity of Hindus,

Sikhs, and Muslims. A peaceful amicable life ends up abruptly and leads to large scale violence. Being very close to the historic event, the author cannot but be subjective, emotional, and sentimental. As a leading critic, Dr. Attar Singh writes:

Woman who is a symbol of the finer and delicate aspects of the mankind and is also the mother of man is always reduced to being the target of man's bestiality in times of disturbance. It is perhaps because of the fact that the constraints and the taboos imposed upon the beast within man are suddenly removed during such crisis and there is a free flow of the suppressed instincts."

The writers have dwelt on the debasement of human character in times of communal frenzy. Some have seen it as an expression of repressed sexual desires. Not only this, raping the women in front of their protectors i.e., fathers, brothers, husbands, gave the feeling of supremacy to the aggressor.

Whereas Nahal, Duggal, Amrita Pritam, Sidhwa and Kahlon and at some places, Nanak Singh, are able to show the perversity of human mind, other writers either do not make the atrocities on women their central theme or at best record some information in their writings. On the whole, the writers have eloquently articulated the physical aspect of such crimes. Barring Sidhwa, Masroor, Pritam and Kahlon, surprisingly not many writers have explored the psychological impact of rape and abductions and their long-term effects. Khushwant Singh does not focus on rapes and abductions but presents scenes of sex and mild flirtations in *Train to Pakistan*. One reason, of course, is to bring under focus the lecherous behaviour of Hukum Chand who represents the administration at that time. Malgonkar too sketches scenes related to sex e.g., Tek Chand and his wife; Sundari's husband with Malti on a beach watched by Sundari through a telescope. Even writers like Chaman Nahal add some titillating scenes e.g., Arun with his sister Madhu, Arun and Chandni, and finally the rape of Sunanda by Rahmat Ullah. Rape scenes appear to be written from angles other than aesthetic and jar the impact of the narrative.

In the novels written from a woman's point of view, *Pinjar* by Amrita Pritam, *Shadows of Times* by Masroor, and *Ice Candy Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa, the writers deal with the theme of partition with full focus on the condition of women, their vulnerability, their exploitation, and their suffering both within the family as well as in the society. All the women writers choose to highlight the plight of women both during the times of crisis as well as in the aftermath. Their suffering gains greater poignancy through sympathetic treatment in the partition novel. These writers seem committed to evoking deep and compassionate understanding of the dilemma of the women, ever the victims of a feudal and capitalistic world. The pre-occupation of these novelists constitutes a significant thematic nucleus in the partition novel and makes *Pinjar*, *Shadows of Times* and *Ice Candy Man* stand apart as memorable works.

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