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Recovered And Restored: The Partition Violence And Conflicting Emotions Of Female Characters In “A Leaf In The Storm” And “Lajwanti”

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the conflicting emotions of various female characters in two seminal short fictions of partition literature. As the victims of gender-specific violence, particularly abduction and rape in this case, during the large-scale migration of people prior to partition, these women hold a precarious position post-recovery and restoration through the Central Recovery Act of 1949. Starting with Lalithambika Antharjanam's "A Leaf in the Storm," this paper provides a detailed study of the range of emotions experienced by the central character, Jyotirmayee Devpal, an unwed yet expectant mother who must decide the fate of her child once it is born inside the rehabilitation camp. Arguably, even though she has been restored to her motherland, with the birth of her child, she will forever remain an outcast from society. Furthermore, through the study of Rajinder Singh Bedi's short story "Lajwanti," it highlights the plight of married women like Lajjo after their acceptance by her husband. Although her position as a wife has been restored, her husband has a difficult time acknowledging her past. As a result, she must suffer in silence and bury her trauma forever in her heart.

Index Terms- Partition, violence, trauma, abduction, rape, rehabilitation.

Introduction

The freedom of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, after centuries of British colonization, came with a price called partition leading to the creation of Pakistan. With the declaration of the boundaries between India and Pakistan, overnight people were burdened with the task of relocating across the border based on their religion; the Hindus were encouraged to come to India and the Muslims were to depart for Pakistan. Thus, the partition of the Indian subcontinent witnessed a large-scale migration of about ten million people in a matter of a few months. With such large scale migration, disease, malnutrition, and death came naturally to people, who often traveled for days in large groups with their belongings and extended family members. Moreover, organized plunder, murder, and communal violence between various ethnicities escalated quickly across villages.

In the chaos of partition, women became the victims of widespread sexual violence that was often taken as an act of vengeance by men against other communities. It has been estimated that more than 75,000 women were abducted and raped by Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh men (Butalia 3). These women were often tortured and humiliated in the most inhuman way by their perpetrators and, in the worst instances, mutilated and murdered. Many of them were forcefully converted and married off by their abductors. The governments of both countries recognized the seriousness of the matter and by September 3, 1947 a joint statement was released by the Prime Ministers that abducted women were to be “restored” (cited in Rao 30) to their families and conversion and forced marriages would not be recognized in this context. And soon the task of recovery began with the help of Military Evacuation Organizations on either side of the border. On December 6, 1947 the prominent social workers and ministers gathered in Lahore to facilitate smooth rescue operation and it was decided that “all women abducted or forcibly married after March 1, 1947” (Rao 31) should be restored. The Indian government established rehabilitation camps in Punjab and appointed prominent female figures such as Kumari Bhag Mehta, Miss Mridula Sarabhai, and Kumari Premvati Thapar to oversee the accommodation and other facilities. The rescue work continued up to August 1948. Then it was handed over to the Ministry of External Affairs. With the passage of time it became more and more difficult for Indian social workers to locate and persuade those abducted women who had settled down through their forced marriages. Their reluctance to return posed a challenge to the recovery operation. The next year the Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act was passed in order to settle disputed cases of recovery between the two countries through a joint tribunal. The act remained in force until 1957.

The Inner Struggle of Motherhood in “A Leaf in the Storm”

Originally written in Malayalam, this short story is set inside a refugee camp in eastern Punjab, against the backdrop of the partition. The central character, a young woman named Jyotirmayee Devpal, has been brought to the camp along with a fresh batch of women reclaimed from the other side of the border. She has been held captive and violated, like most of the inmates. While others are visibly traumatized, sad, angry, and vengeful, she is silent and conflicted from within. The reason is that she is bearing the consequences of that violation within her womb. She refuses food as she doesn't wish to live on with her condition. She even talks to the camp doctor to get rid of the baby. However, as an ardent follower of non-violence, he refuses to harm an innocent life. Instead, he preaches to her the importance of life over death, no matter how insignificant it is for others. Jyoti has no choice but to endure it all in secret. One day, a dead infant is found inside the toilet. It is evident that it has been strangled by its mother since birth. The scavenger picks it up and puts it inside the garbage bin without any questions or judgment. Jyoti is tempted to do the same when the moment arrives for her. As the narrative jumps forward, she gives birth to a child after a painful labor out in the open courtyard in the middle of the night. Her first instinct is to smother the child. Yet her maternal instinct takes over once she touches the child. She feels a sort of tenderness in her heart that she has never felt before. Instead, she leaves the child in the open but soon returns to claim it as her own. She wants to accept it and acknowledge it before the world.

What we witness here is the rollercoaster of emotions felt by a young, educated, and unmarried woman whose experience of motherhood is fraught with the realization that her child is not the natural consequence of love or marital union but an unforeseen by-product of communal violence and hatred during the division of the nation. Like her motherland, she is going through a period of crisis. Earlier, she had been a confident, self-assured, fearless, and radical woman in her community, fighting for her rights and the freedom of her country. Now she is deeply conflicted, secretive, and struggling to make a decision for her unborn child. She is one of those who survived the ordeal of gendered violence, only to face a fate greater than death, for they were not accepted back into their families or communities owing to their conservative and patriarchal values, which valued chastity over life. Abducted women were considered profane and a source of shame for their community. Families often killed them, drove them away, or refused to acknowledge them all together. This is how these victims ended up in refugee camps. Moreover, in most cases, their own fathers, brothers, and sons put them to death in the face of imminent danger. Hence, in many instances, women chose death by suicide over survival. Those who chose death were glorified, whereas those who chose to live were slut-shamed and ostracized. Their violated bodies could find shelter only in the confines of refugee camps. No matter what caste, class, or community a woman belonged to, her violation erased her claim to belongingness and her right to a place in society. There was no place for them in society on either side of the border. And in this story, Jyoti is very much

aware of this fact. It is significant to note that she never bothers to reveal the details of her past life prior to her abduction, not even her full name, because it is no longer relevant for her. She knows that no matter where she goes, she can no longer achieve what she once fought for. Hence, while crossing the border through the exchange program, she wonders if she is merely stepping “from one prison to another” (Antharjanam 137). In this context, it is crucial to note that inside the metaphorical prison of the camp, she further isolates herself in order to hide her pregnancy. Her body itself becomes a prison where she must hide that part of herself that will forever remind her of the violation and her shame. Her hesitation in birthing the child can be taken as a sort of coping mechanism for the trauma and the consequent judgment it entails. Abortion seems to be the only choice for her to dissociate herself from her traumatic past. Thus, the plight of non-violence strikes her as moral cowardice on the part of the doctor. There is a moment in the story when she is prompted to think about the precarious position of the child once it is born. A prominent speaker visits and advises people to accept the violated women as wives and mothers. He even claims that all the children born out of violation are, in fact, the first citizens of free India. His statement seems to be a veiled reference to one of the speeches given by Mahatma Gandhi on December 26, 1947. Troubled by the reports of sexual violence and abduction, he had encouraged the people of India not to discriminate against abducted women and to openly accept them back into society. Although everyone else seems to appreciate this Gandhian message, Jyoti is forced to evaluate the statement and ask the question of the children’s belongingness. No doubt she has been successfully reclaimed by her country, but the same cannot be said about her child. She realizes that without a father behind them, the children of defiled mothers will always remain on the fringe or border of society. Hence, she is hesitant to accept her child after its birth. For a brief moment, she abandons the child under the tree with the wishful thinking that he will be a child of nature. However, she soon returns to claim him as her own, and this ultimate moment of acceptance doesn’t change anything for the better. In a way, her acceptance of the “bundle of her misery and shame (Antharjanam 144) is somewhat poignant because it signifies that unlike the old woman and the wife of the officer from Sindh, she will not take the memory of her trauma to heart but will pass it on to her child. As a child of the new nation, he will inadvertently inherit the generational trauma that comes with its citizenship.

The Nuances of Acceptance in “Lajwanti”

It is the story of a woman who returns to her husband after being held captive by a Muslim man across the border for a while. The woman is a village girl named Lajwanti, aka Lajjo, and her husband is Sunderlal, who has now settled down in a place called Mohalla Shakoor in post-partition India. As the narrative begins, we see that he has been appointed as the secretary of the local rehabilitation centre for abducted women, those who have been recovered from Pakistan through the exchange program. Despite the opposition of local conservatives, he takes up the responsibility of spreading awareness about the program. He leads processions and engages in discussions with the locals in support of the program. He pleads with people to accept the victims back into families and show compassion to them, urging them never to “remind them... of the humiliation they have suffered” (Bedi 23). Deeply hurt by the collective indifference of the community, he resolves to treat Lajjo better if she ever returns, even though he has been abusive towards her despite marrying her on his own accord. And one day she finally arrives at the Wagha border and he receives her. When most of the recovered women are denied recognition by their family members right before him, he openly accepts Lajjo and take her home.

The narrator constantly highlights the collective impassiveness and hostility of the residents of Mohalla Shakoor towards Sunderlal and his noble cause. The local religious head, Narain Baba, always preaches in support of chastity and honour, citing the removal of Sita from Ayodhya in order to reinforce his ideas. Apart from him, those who had been able to successfully guard the honour of their womenfolk while crossing the border are more annoyed by the constant processions. Instead, they proudly flaunt their wives with their honour still intact. In a society where abducted women were expected to kill themselves after their defilement, Sunderlal's dedication to the collective good of society as well as his act of acceptance seem commendable. However, upon closer inspection, it is obvious that even though he has accepted Lajjo back, he is not equipped to deal with her after her recovery, even with all of his involvement with the rehabilitation program. Grateful upon her return, he starts to show her excessive kindness and addresses her as Devi. In this process of isolation, he overlooks the fragile mental state of his wife, who is yearning for compassion, love, and support from her husband. Every time she tries to open up before him, he dismisses the past, thus trivializing her lived experience of gendered partition violence. It looks like in his newfound fervour for protection and acceptance towards

Lajjo, there is no place for a broken, violated woman; rather, she has to be equated with a goddess to cross the threshold of his house. In his constant search for proof of physical violence or trauma, he forgets to acknowledge and understand the humiliation Lajjo must have felt while being commodified across the border. The popular line is, "Do not touch Lajwanti, for she will curl up and die." (Bedi 21) used by his group of volunteers seems ironic, because whereas Lajjo has been brave and open enough to discuss her past with her husband, he is the one who seems to be terrified of it. It is he who has to 'curl up' and go into denial about the past.

While discussing the Central Recovery Act in her essay, "Abducted and Widowed Women: Questions of Sexuality and Citizenship During Partition", critic Urvashi Butalia has pointed out that rather than the suffering of women and their violations, the collective concern for abducted women was more about male honour at three different levels: "in the family, the community, and the nation" (102). Having lost a part of their land, the citizens of newly independent India thought the abduction and violation of their women was an assault upon their honour. The abduction program was an attempt to recover that honour at every level. Only the restoration of their young women could restore their "emasculated, weakened" manhood (Butalia, The190). These words offer a significant insight into the actions of Sunderlal. As the secretary of the rehabilitation program, he is more concerned about the collective responsibility of his community and nation than about his personal responsibility as a husband. Again and again, he speaks passionately about the innocence of those women in general and challenges Narain Baba's concept of Ramarajya as outdated. He speaks about the victimhood of Sita as well as the "innocent Sitas" (Bedi 25) of partition in a patriarchal society who have suffered in silence. However, he forgets that, as a husband, he has coerced Lajjo into silence by ignoring her attempts to tell her side of the story. As a result, the minute details of her experience of partition violence will forever remain in the dark. No doubt she has been recovered and restored back into society by the charitable Sunderlal, but sadly, she has lost her place as a wife in his household. The Lajwanti of this story has survived the trauma but has been silenced forever, thus suffering a metaphorical death at the hands of her husband, Sunderlal.

Conclusion

The lives of abducted women, as represented in these stories, highlight the marginalized position they hold in society post-recovery. Jyoti must endure a life of seclusion inside the rehabilitation camp for the sake of her child, and Lajwanti must remain silent forever in order to live with Sunderlal. Moreover, both of them go through a similar pattern of estrangement in an indifferent environment. For example, Lajjo has been reinstated in her family, which is surrounded by a patriarchal, orthodox community that will forever distance itself from her. Inside the family, with his flawed notion of kindness and appreciation, her husband is unknowingly distancing himself from her. Thus, without any emotional intimacy or possibility of communication, she withdraws herself further as a protective mechanism, fearing every moment the past anger and violence of her man. Similarly, although Jyoti has been placed in a rehabilitation camp, she cannot be fully reintegrated into society owing to her pregnancy. Even inside the camp, she had to isolate herself in order to protect herself from judgment and humiliation. With the birth of her child, her fate is sealed, and both of them will forever remain on the periphery of society. In other words, both of these women have been accepted yet systematically alienated and, in a way, rejected by society. Thus, their acceptance is conditional, which forces them into confinement, silence, and consequent invisibility. Both Lajjo and Jyoti represent the fate of thousands of abducted women who have lost their sense of belongingness as a wife, a mother, or a daughter and are pushed into an emotional void as the charity cases of respective communities. Owing to the inflexible notions of purity and chastity held by society, they are forever trapped in the trauma of gendered violence that erupted in the no man's land between two countries caught up in partition even after crossing the border.

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