



Silent shrieks of invisible bruises: Finding her story in partition history

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Abstract

The article investigates multi-layered violence inflicted on women in the process of nation-building and the discourse of nationalism, in context of the Partition of 1947, as represented in a real account and a short story taken for the study. The paper is an attempt to understand how women experienced this event, as represented in the narratives taken, which would further throw some light on the world we live in today. Women suffered a lot worse, in kind and degree, than men at the time of Partition. In every communal strife they remain at the receiving end. Their bodies are violated, homes are destroyed, their men and children are killed and they are left with the task of rebuilding the community. But the question arises why we hear so less about them? Why a veil of silence surrounds when it comes to talking of these victimized women? The holocaust of Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 serves a very ripe ground that manifests the above mentioned idea in its crudest form.

Keywords: partition, women, violence, nation, gender

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 ceases to be an event that can be buried in the abyss of the history of our civilization. The borderline contentiously drawn by the British, at the dawn of Independence, has assumed a perpetual and huge diplomatic tension between India and Pakistan. The dispute over Kashmir remains a gaping wound for the people and governments of both sides since that hurried wind-up of British rule. The fight for Kashmir has not only been the causal factor in the three Indo-Pak wars; it is an everyday proxy-war that claims lives of soldiers and civilians of both sides, besides taking heavy toll on the economies of two developing nations. The spectra of Partition is not only limited to Kashmir. Its ramifications have been much deeper. The debates on the nature of both nations – India continually jostling for secularism, Pakistan on its Islamic identity- are only offshoots of the dynamics of Partition. The recent spurt of debates on nationalism getting unprecedented overtones is testimony of the seeds of conflict sown at the time of demarcation of boundaries.

With historians interested in the politics of the epoch, particularly with the movements and institutional procedures of Independence, the 'human' side of the story remained neglected. This motivated many writers, like Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishna Sobti and others, to take up the task of representing the unrepresented. The ugly monstrous face of Independence in the form of Partition needed to be unveiled to present the ineffable tragedies of millions of people. With renewed academic interest and rise of feminist activism, writers and scholars began to investigate the multi-dimensional victimization of women during that period. If there were novelists like Bapsi Sidhwa, Khushwant Singh, Amitav Ghosh, who portrayed the individual and cultural trauma and memory of the epoch; scholars like Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, Kamala Bhasin, Veena Das, Jill Didur and others undertook projects to look out for real victims and

excavate their real accounts and analysis of partition fiction to understand multi-fold and agonizing victimization of women in the riots as well as the principles and practices of the nationhood.

Gender and nation are both debated as human/social constructions. Both have had respective historical genesis and rootedness with no discrete initiation discernable. Male and female were born primarily as 'sexed' with a particular array of anatomical finite features, transformed into gender that evolved gradually in a curious mix of environmental and human interface, generating threads of explorations and identity polemics, excluding the new problematics of transsexual entities. Anthropologically, human was a nomad genus significantly ahead of animal in coping with the life and the world out there. The course of thousands of years transformed the primitive organism into an organized and 'civilized' human giving rise to whole complex matrix of nations, societies, cultures, values and so on.

Interestingly, the language humans came to acquire and develop shaped up the world. Language did not remain confined to the commonsensical understanding of representational medium but served as the constitutive site of paradigmatic plane of consciousness and identity. Humans are interpretive beings. The origin of language perhaps lies in the impulse to make reality intelligible, hence the thought get dressed in the system of language. A careful examination posits the sexualized/sexuated understanding of the world, entities and notions. Almost everything got divided into the binary of male-female implicitly implying the underlying bias, contingently fossilized in the perpetuating power-struggle manifesting itself as the primordial instinct of humans to be. Hence gender and nation are so intricately related.

Engendering the perspective

Foucault has comprehensively theorized on the inter-

relationship of power, knowledge and body. He believes that not only minds but even human bodies are shaped by formal and informal socio-political institutions. In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, he highlights that where there is desire, the power relations are already present (82). The juridical-discursive model of power, according to him, exposes that the legal system is just the way of exercising violence under the guise of general law. Power tames and defines sexuality with the techniques and modes of knowledge. He employs a term “Bio-power” as constitutive of diverse modes and techniques used to subjugate and control the bodies in a society.

It is really bewildering that the narrative of woman was constructed so insidiously that nobody could object to her sexual ‘purity’ established as a metaphor and vehicle for the pride and purity of a nation. State and the subsidiary religious and cultural groups hegemonically made authoritative claims on her reproductive, conjugal and fundamental rights of expression and will. The collectivist tendencies like that of nationalist projects objectified and instrumentalized women for the propagation of their agendas. As Cynthia Enloe states that:

Women are invested with ideological significance as - the community’s or nation’s most valuable possessions; the principle vehicles for transmitting the nation’s values from one generation to the next; bearers of the community’s future generations—crudely, nationalist wombs; the members of the community most vulnerable to defilement and exploitation by oppressive alien rulers and; most susceptible to assimilation and co-option by insidious outsiders. (qtd. in Menon54)

In the narratives of the nationhood, nation is thus always an effeminate entity and considered as in need of constant protection; women are reckoned as “the biological and cultural reproducers of the nation and as ‘pure’ and ‘modest’ and men defend the national image and protect the nation’s territory, women’s ‘purity’ and ‘modesty’ and the ‘moral code’” (Yuval-Davis *Gender and Nation* 34). Thus women are represented as the nation’s social and biological womb and the men as its protectors: “women [are] sedate rather than dynamic.... [t]hey [stand] for immutability rather than progress, providing the backdrop against which men determine[d] the fate of the nation” (Mosse23). Though in real, these normative identities are often confronted, seldom do we find in the national grandiloquence ambivalence over any of these issues of identity.

The very language of nationalism singles women out as the symbolic repository of group identity. As Anderson points out, nationalism describes its object using either the vocabulary of kinship (motherland, *patria*) or home (*heimat*), in order to denote something to which one is ‘naturally’ tied. Nationness is thus equated with gender, parentage, skin-color - all those things that are not chosen and which, by virtue of their inevitability, elicit selfless attachment and sacrifice. The association of women with the private domain reinforces the merging of the nation/community with the selfless mother/devout wife; the obvious response of coming to her defense and even dying for her is automatically triggered.

Women may be controlled in different ways in the interests of demarcating and preserving the identities of national/ethnic collectivities.

Recovery operations act: A gendered perspective

In the commotion of harrowing violence during Partition of India-Pakistan, caused by myopic political decisions and polarized positions, the women from both bisected territories were abducted, raped, tortured to the most heinous levels of cruelties. Once the dust of blood settled, there was an overzealous exercise and resolve from both sides to bring back the daughters of the motherland. In this regard the first step was taken at Congress Session of Merrut of 23-26 November 1946. A resolution was passed under the guidance of Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad, that stated, “Women who have been abducted and forcibly married *must be* restored to their houses; mass conversions haveno significance and validity and people must be given every opportunity to return to the life of their choice” (qtd. in Menon 69).

In her book *Borders & Boundaries*, Ritu Menon refers to the description of Recovery Operations by Kamlaben Patel, a social worker who worked for five years from 1947 to 1952 in the processes of recovering and rehabilitating abducted women. There are some heart-rending events mentioned in her record. She writes about 600 women who were returned by Pakistan military some months after the Inter-Dominion agreement of November 1947. Kamlaben found them in utter misery, reduced to skeletons with malnourished children. They were sexually abused, exploited and drained by the Pakistan military personnel. She describes:

I saw the state of the women, the ground almost slipped from under my feet. They looked like human skeletons-the women as well as children! They looked as if they belonged to another time. Those who were young had also become old by being used...when these women were brought to us we were at a loss about how to handle this unprecedented situation. We had prepared a meal for healthy women...this food we had prepared was unfit for emaciated and ill people, a few children died on the spot, one of them in my arms. (81)

The violence on women has also foregrounded the subaltern status of woman as she has been deprived of speaking for herself. Besides the historiographical subjective limitation of delineating history in matter of facts and facts of matter that eluded the human articulation of the experiences of the same facts and matters, there is an apparent male narrator dominating as spokesperson of the human kind, until the recent struggles by the feminist movements for the voice. As Urvashi Butalia also notes in her research work on finding the stories hidden within the women’s bosoms and buried on their lips, she admits that the violence on women is covered in silence. She goes on to interview the people who had been victims or witness to the heinous crimes committed against humanity in general and women in particular in the aftermath of violence.

In her remarkably thorough work and well documented real stories, one comes to realize the factuality of the poignant

truths inscribed in the fictional narratives of Partition based violence. Through her analysis of the real incidents as reproduced in the interviews and the real stories that transmitted to the communities common sites, she scrutinized the woman side of the suffering, forbearing, silence and the patriarchal ruling notions and values kept intact in ignorance due to lack of critical evaluation or self interest. She takes up the real tragic story of Shaheed Buta Singh and Zainab. Zainab, daughter of an elite Muslim family was saved by Buta Singh from a predatory mob in the post Partition transition. He faces the wrath of his community for keeping a Muslim girl in his home. To protect her, he takes her as his religiously wedded wife. But, provoked by his relatives, the police take her away to Pakistan in the process of Recovery Operations. Then begins his turmoil of bringing back his wife and mother of his small son. It is a heart rendering account of bureaucratic and political system sucking an individual's life with nowhere at fault. How the system comprising of humans assume so monstrous shapes and proportions! He leaves no stone unturned, reaches Pakistan somehow to trace his Zainab only to get dejected that there is, an arbitrarily constructed, political wall that turns unassailable. In the court, Zainab refuses to recognize him as her husband and denies going to him. This unexpected boulder of shock kills his soul and in utmost despair he jumps in front of a coming train with their son. Even his last wish of getting cremated in Zainab's hometown is not fulfilled for not getting permission from religious mullahs fearing backlash. Butalia points out that in the articulation of this tragic story Buta Singh is expressed as the sole victim and nowhere the predicament of Zainab is given the due. She states:

Zainab and Buta Singh's story stayed with me: it was a moving story, but more, I kept returning to it out of a nagging, persistent sense of dissatisfaction. As it was told, this was the story of a hero and a "victim." We learnt something about the hero: his impulsive nature, his honesty and steadfastness, his willingness to give up everything for the woman he loved, the strength of his love. But nothing about the victim. Try as I might, I could not recover *her* voice. What had Zainab felt? Had she really cared for Buta Singh, or was she indifferent to both the men in her life? How had the experience of abduction, almost certainly of rape, marked her? It was said that Zainab and Buta Singh were happy, that they were even in love. Yet the man had actually bought her, purchased her like chattel: how then could she have loved him? (97)

Same kind of predicament can be found in the fictional account i.e a short story "A Visitor From Pakistan" (EkShehri Pakistan Ka) by Ramlal, which underlines the inter-crossing of the necessitated fate of individuals placed within the historical-textuality of nation. The peculiar aspect of the story is that what could become a deadlock or unresolvable question, is so 'smoothly' resolved by legal framework chartered for the settlement of 'ownership claims' of human relations, whose basis has significantly nothing to do with the same, eliminating the participation of community to examine under their own jurisprudence. As Veena Das argues "...the life of community was completely entangled with the forms of

govern mentality that were set in motion after the riots. However, it is to be kept in mind that the forms of govern mentality are themselves instituted through sporadic, intermittent contact rather an effective panoptic surveillance" (*Life and Words* 167).

The story recounts the uncanny position a woman and her two alive husbands find themselves in when their individuality (that becomes citizenship) comes out to be inter-woven and defined by the collectivity (that becomes nationality) - an entity to which neither they can deny affiliation nor can affirm as active agent in scripting their own fateful conflict. Saraswati was married to Baldev. Baldev was presumed dead in the Partition riots by her family. Sunderdas who saved the lives of her family and helped them settle down in his village becomes an obvious choice in the semiotic plane of community practices. She is happily settled with Sunder das and their two children.

One day Baldev enters the house. She is benumbed by her arrival, unable to comprehend the situation in its real facet. Baldev too finds himself awkwardly placed facing his loving wife taking care of her children from her second man. Baldev's eyes were fixed on Saraswati. That beautiful woman with intoxicating eyes, heavy lips and a youthful body had once been his. She had been his wife. He looked at her with infinite love and tried hard to suppress the storm of desire rising up within him. Saraswati blushed with shame, turned pale and sorrowful... her eyes were filled with tears, which flowed down her face and fell on her shirt (Ramlal, "A Visitor from Pakistan" 181).

His mother-in-law explains to him the background of the new settlement. How he was assumed dead in the circumstances and Sunder das came to their rescue in not only saving their lives but reinstating them and their 'widowed' daughter in the distressed times. Her mother wept, "...my daughter's life is ruined. Her reputation lies in mud... she has two husbands now. Hai, hai...why don't you kill yourself Saraswati? Why doesn't the earth open up and swallow you? You escaped from Pakistan with your honour intact. But now death is the only solution left" (182). People from the neighbourhood also swarmed in, thrilled and curious.

In the meantime, her 'present' husband Sunder das comes. A deep mark of wound on Sunder das's face reminded Baldev of their past encounter. They had fought over Saraswati. How the equation of power has changed on his side! Baldev realized. Sunder das challenged him to knock at the court. This challenge of Sunderdas owes to his hitherto unknown knowledge of his privileged status in the legal discourse of his own collectivity. Baldev knew the futility of the same and called for immediate decision in Saraswati's intent. What could she choose? Does woman's choice really matters? Can she act on her own volition? Woman's life is replete with predicaments. Saraswati cries out bitterly for she doesn't know what to do. She is a victim of circumstances which has marked her life with pain and suffering. Saraswati could only cry when a man enters with summons for a Pakistani citizen that was Baldev. Baldev quietly leaves the house with a heavy heart leaving Saraswati in a dilemmatic situation for lifetime. So long she was unaware of his being alive she was happy but now her scars remain unhealed and her agony is intensified after she knows that her first husband is alive.

The story shows how the 'national tag' on Baldev deprives him of his love, life and hope. Being saved by a Muslim schoolteacher, he chooses to settle in Pakistan to make his living, sensing the loss of all loved ones. But his vivified hopes of beginning his life afresh are all quashed when the summons from the government make him realize the bitter truth. He is not an Indian citizen and hence, he is powerless to exclaim and claim for his legitimate rights of love and life. It is quite symbolic that the summon reach at the very moment Saraswati was called upon to make decision. Her authority to decide for her future is actually a misnomer. She too perhaps knows that it's the patriarch, familial in visible and national invisible, that decides her course of life. She is only a mute participant, a citizen for whom the change of nation remains immaterial. "Defending one's own community and country has been seen as an ultimate citizen's duty – to die (as well as to kill) for the sake of the homeland or the nation" (Yuval-Davis, "Women, Citizenship and Difference" 12). Kathleen Jones's extended this thought to include that "the body is a significant dimension in the definition of citizenship [and] citizenship has been linked with the ability to take part in armed struggle for national defence, this ability has been equated with maleness, while femaleness has been equated with weakness and the need for male protection" (qtd. in Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* 89).

She was rescued by someone who had fought with her beloved for her possession. How the perpetrators of violence turned out to be her benefactors in disguise. He pounced on the tempting opportunity to save the family of the girl he desired to possess. His lust got imbued in the hues of malevolence in the dust of turbulent circumstances. He became the messiah, the savior of the honor, bread and shelter of the family and so 'rightfully' and judiciously became the obvious proprietor of the property he set eyes upon. Now how the nation again came to his rescue at the moment when the alive husband and love of the woman, Baldev from another nation comes to reunite with her. Saraswati's voice remains silent in the cries, she is the victim of nations writ large on destiny. No doubt, there is ambiguity in her cries that are always difficult to be deciphered, she might not have gone with Baldev but the fact is that she could never speak her mind and heart.

John Lechte, influenced by Kristeva's theory of the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic, argues that "the private, which is the domain of difference, and the public political domain, can be posited not as a dyad of opposites, but as the first being the materiality of the latter, which gives it its particular meaning. In other words, every discussion of individual differences already involves the public domain" (Lechte qtd. in Davis, "Women, Citizenship and Difference" 18).

The silence of Saraswati cannot be relegated to a private domain, instead it is structured by the public/political discourses of nation and its subsets. The over-enthusiasm displayed by the Indian State overtly portraying itself as more civilized, concerned and democratic in approach was interlaced with the grandiose narrative of Hindu-father-patriarch of reclaiming the women as 'markers' of the worthiness of their hold as well as positing the unsaid control over the reproductive choices and 'products' of the women.

Ritu Menon notes:

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 transporting them out of their country. It became, in effect and in a supreme irony, its hated Other. In its articulation of gender identity and public policy, moreover, the state underlined the primacy of religious identity and, implicitly and explicitly, departed from its neutrality in assigning value to the 'legitimate' family and community "honour". It did so through a regulation of women's sexuality; indeed, through legislation and executive and policy action (126).

The violence on women foreground the subaltern status of woman as she has been deprived of speaking for herself. Besides the historiographical subjective limitation of delineating history in matter of facts and facts of matter that eluded the human articulation of the experiences of the same facts and matters, there is an apparent male narrator dominating as spokesperson of the human kind, until the recent struggles by the feminist movements for the voice. As Urvashi Butalia also notes in her research work on finding the stories hidden within the women's bosoms and buried on their lips, she admits that the violence on women is covered in silence.

Conclusion

Though both the accounts may be perceived and relegated to a bygone past of more than sixty years, but one cannot deny the fact that nothing much has changed as far as women victimization is concerned especially in major parts of Asia-Arab including India. The only difference is that today it has been classified into various categories namely rapes, domestic violence, work place harassment, dowry and marital issues, eve-teasing, women reservations, immoral trafficking, property rights, live-in relationship rights or 'wrongs' and sexual oppression in and outside marriage etc. These categories serve as convenient domains for academics, social research and policy formations. Equivalently, the stratification makes it convenient for the state to address gender violence in legal framework. Underlying all this is the bare fact of perpetuated women subordination to men.

There have been an immense and widespread activism for asserting equality of genders to eliminate the violence exercised by the male over female. These discourses have primarily been sociological and political or epistemological in the broader sense. But the enormity and necessity demands de-ontologising the very rubric of intra-human inter-sex relationship complemented by a studied activism for acquiring equal and unbiased political, economic and social rights. The genesis and possibility of violence between sexes can be mitigated or resolved by destabilizing the naturalized notions/concepts and values which have permeated every sphere of our existential space. Since the advent of liberal and Marxist schools of feminism actively struggling for political economic and institutional rights of women, the ramifications of the movements can be noticed in our country too. But, as in west, the radical and psychoanalytical school of feminism, initiated by the profound theoretical insights of Simone De

Beauvoir, Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler and others, challenged the very foundations of meanings and symbols created by the phallogocentric authority, no such forceful activism backed by the intellectual critical enquiry could make an impact here. Instead going by the present milieu the very label of Modern India seems an oxymoron with medieval feudo-patriarchal archaic notions and values still ruling the mindset of the populace.

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