

The Question of Healing and Forgetting: Disturbing Realities in Short Stories of Ritu Menon and Uravashi Bhutalia

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It is taken for granted that during partition (Indo-Pak, 1947), Hindus were massacred by Muslims and same is considered true vice versa. This is a deep rooted attitude behind years of prejudice between both the communities. The collective sensibility of one community has affected the other. The available history of partition discusses mainly the political issues or is marked with patriotic bias. For the historians, it has been a constitutional or political arrangement which does not affect the contours of Indian society. If seen from the perspective of survivors, the history of partition appears very different. It is all violence for them. This difference leads to a wide chasm between history and the account in form of oral history in particular about partition; its pain and silence. On one hand where nations can insulate them behind national interests and agendas, the communities that faced partition have to live with painful memories and moments of violence they faced. Uravashi Bhutalia in her *The Other Side of Silence* and Ritu Menon in her *Borders and Boundaries* narrates the inhuman experiences of women migrants and trauma faced by survivors. Women in their short stories speak for themselves, without any restrictions or depending on any critic or historian to interpret their pain, about the violence they faced by strangers as well as their near and dear ones. They were subjected to rape and abduction, given no choice of repatriation, were forced to abort or abandon children fathered by their abductors. They struggled to put their life together in state of loss of identity and belongingness. The paper tries to investigate the link between community, caste, gender with violence at the time of partition. It deals with the “memory” that steps in when history fails to address the issue of dislocation. It discusses women’s unspeakable horrifying experiences, their painful truth and their silence that is still in the process of healing and forgetting.

Keywords: partition, displacement, violence, revenge, traditions, boundaries, riots, religion, oral history

Introduction

The weaker sections of society are most subjected to violence whether in terms of caste, race, religion or gender. If we talk of women, we come across histories of mass rape or gang rape; violence here takes a shape of asserting power where the situation becomes polarized as “our women” who are weak or scared and “their women” who are fit targets to attack. Violence against women ranges from abusing to severe oppressions. The concept of violence against women becomes more confusing when in society at places we find it as a legitimate means of resolving problems and is socially accepted. When on one side we believe that all forms of coercion on an individual or a group comes under violence, it becomes very difficult to draw a line in social mechanisms,

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where in the cover of ideology women face subtle pressures of compliance which if disobeyed result to severe punishments physically as well as mentally. The hierarchical structure of violence is so deeply interwoven that women at places face atmosphere of terror, threat and other forms of social expressions of right and wrong: that the norms that legitimize this aggression need to be questioned. The traditional societies have divided men and women in their own spaces; where men are in control of the outer world and women in their household being governed by the positions of their men and relate to the outer world through male eyes. How in such situations that existed then and in some societies exist now women cope with their subordinated positions and hone then ideology and language to the language of society? How they internalize the norms rooted in patriarchal ideology some times in old forms and sometimes in new guise? From traditional to modern outlook women remain oppressive realities. Such questions crowd the mind when one reads narratives on women.

Writing From the Margins

When it comes to writing by women about their experiences, very few have turned to write and express openly their harassment and the strategies they have used to cope up with it. They have always been made to assume and brainwashed that they are the carriers of family reputation and bear the burden of histories, memories and their bodily experiences,

when men and women narrate the same reality, even then the descriptions, the images and comparisons, the perspective and perceptions may differ. It's not merely a question of two different kinds of articulation or voices. More often, it is the male gaze which frames the women even as a writer. So the first need becomes to shake off this hold, to find a voice which can free itself of this gaze to find a space or create one outside this spacing.¹

Whenever an experience is narrated, gender is an important aspect to look for, because men and women experience differently. Not only this, their manner of “contextualizing, analyzing and communicating” is also different. They have their own strengths and weaknesses and have witnessed history and culture differently. Political discourses and writing of history have conventionally been men's domain where surprisingly we hardly find any women voice. The reality that women underwent has never been the expectation of a history reader or one interested in politics. The language in history has been consciously used as to displaying of mere factual details of incidences and women experience of that time is missing even in the background. Subsequently there develops a need to explore in these historical narrations the suppressed voices of women, their inner being and how they relate themselves to it.

Political Facts and the Oral History of Loss

The Partition of India in August 1947 is one of the great human convulsion where in few months about 12 million people crossed borders resulting to inexplicable savagery of loot, rape, abduction, all that remains in human memory is migration, violence and uproar. The main reason of partition of British India into two dominion states of India and Pakistan was the policy of “divide and rule” by British rulers—to tide over the growing national demand of independence with the communal demands of Muslims. Failing to convert congress into a “safety valve” to avert any 1857 revolution like event, government desperately tried to break the growing nationalist outlook of Indian leaders; liberal and extremists alike—by setting up of separate organization based on religion, castes and vested interests. Muslim league demanded separate electorate and

¹ Jain, Jasbir and Supriya Agarwal eds., *Gender and Narrative* (Jaipur: Rawat. 2002), xii.

reservation of seats for Muslims which was readily accepted by 1909 act. This was the first step which led most of the Muslims to believe that their solution lies in supporting British rule to come over the tyranny of Hindu Raj if ever national independence movement succeed in future.

Muslim leaders like M.A. Jinnah and Ali brothers soon shed their garbs of nationalism and became staunch advocates of Muslim communalism. Jinnah fourteen point program in response to Nehru's plan, his participation in second round table conference in London, opposing Gandhi's demand, his criticism of congress ministers and ultimately his enunciation of "Two nation theory" led to Lahore resolution of Pakistan. He ultimately won his cherished goal by tactical cooperation with British in World War II, by sabotaging the "interim government", withdrawing the approval of cabinet mission plan.

Britain decided to withdraw and declared intention to leave India by 15th June 1948. Wavell was replaced —Mountbatten became viceroy. He could not reconcile difference between Congress and League. Finally, Mountbatten plan of 3rd June 1947 was approved both by congress and league and date of British departure was fixed; when Pakistan came into existence and India on 15th Aug. 1947.

Politically, the borders were created on head counts of Hindus v/s Muslims but both governments never anticipated that this would lead to fleeing of such a huge population to what they considered safer places. Urvashi Butalia in her work *The Other Side of Silence* and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in their *Borders and Boundaries* narrates the experiences of partition survivors; a form of oral history that expresses painful memories and moments of violence. Partition is not only political fact,

Partition was surely more than just a political divide, or a division of properties, of assets and liabilities. It was also, to use a phrase that survivors use repeatedly a "division of hearts". It brought untold suffering, tragedy, trauma, pain and violence to communities who had hitherto lived together in some kind of social contact. It separated families across an arbitrarily drawn border, sometimes overnight and made it practically impossible for people to know if their parents, sisters brothers or children were alive or dead.²

People travelled across several times in search of their family members facing the danger of being arrested on charge of being a spy. Some met after span of 50 years and for others it was empty handed "search".

Women suffered the most in the crisis days. If men suffered displacement and loss of material possessions, physical suffering; that could be made up with the passage of time, women during partition suffered loss of dignity that is closely aligned with "sexual purity". The writers Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon narrate the incidents through the characters within the text. They relate their experience from their memory and it requires a leap of imagination by the readers as to what is represented in partition literature's multidirectional flow of time and space. According to the political facts, partition was one incident of the past but the reality associated with it is scattered throughout pages of time. Partition is seen everywhere in form of communal riots and religious fundamentalism. Both the communities keep on targeting each other as there are lots of repressed rage and aggression of that one political happening where memories are used selectively by aggressors arguing that because Muslims have killed Hindus and raped their women so in turn they must be killed and their women must be raped and vice versa. "There were no good people and no bad ones. Virtually every family had a history of being both victims and aggressors"³ *The Other Side of Silence* and *Borders and Boundaries* are written on the interviews of partition survivors where language becomes the controlling factor: narrators

² Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books. 1998), 8.

³ Ibid., 11.

moving back and forth into personal and collective memories trying to relate incidents from mind's eye, negotiating their social locations and roles, their difficulty of speaking some half said things and writers trying to listen articulation through their silence and absences. Writers feel that while listening to the survivors, they could recognize that there is something as "gender telling of partition". Most interviews took place in family situations and over an extended period of time, with no neat chronologies, it was a reliving of past from the context of present. It must have been difficult for writers to ask difficult and disturbing questions for bringing in oral histories especially female memories and bodily experiences, interpreting their pain about violence they faced by strangers as well as their near and dear ones. As the narration unfolds one finds complex psychological emotional space "lived experience" their compromises and silences. Both the works discussed are by women writers. They have a kind of sensibility to translate and share every act, movement and give meaning to every pause and silence. Such invisible areas might remain unknown to patriarchal eye but women due to their cultural knowledge can instinctively relate to it. As an unknown writer writes,

Look not at my finger
Look where I am pointing

One immediately comes into recognizing gendered positions of narration or readership. All those who have studied modern Indian history have never learnt this side of reality of women suffering and the intensity of their gendered experience. One always finds in history, politicians and kings fighting for power and supremacy. They change but people never had to change. August 1947 witnessed a huge exchange of population. The phase of partition was a phase of mental frenzy that both Hindus and Muslims had no control. Between August and November 1947, about 673 trains moved 2,800,000 refugees. The rich travelled in planes that flew 6 to 7 everyday between India and Pakistan, but the poor could not get any means of transport. They moved on foot column called Kafilas that took almost 8 days to cross a given spot these columns were initially 30,000-40,000 the largest consisted of about 400,000 people. It is said that 24 Kafilas of people have moved from Layallpur and Montgomery to India bringing 849,000 people from west to east. These kafilas made murderous attacks, there were flights and the weak or disabled children and women were left behind. Large number of women were picked from the edges of kafilas and raped.

Drawing of boundaries was a difficult task as religious associations to that place did not match with geographical patterns or political considerations. Therefore, the complex geographical boundary ran through peoples life "The Amrita Bazar Patrika labeled it the departing kick of British imperialism at both Hindus and Muslims' while Dawn called it 'territorial murder'."⁴ With this, everything was put on stake "jobs, livelihoods, property and homeland". Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon in their works do not look partition as a "political negotiation" nor people as "numbers" of history or "informants", but try to look deep into the lives of survivors, whose lives are the history of partition. Disappearance of the women was talked in whispers. It was considered as something to be ashamed of. In this silence and whispering lies history of partition that forms the search of both the texts.

Violence on Women: A Gendered Reality

Mass rape of women was used as a weapon. Thousands of women to preserve their honor and chastity jumped into the well or took poison. Instead of being sexually spoiled by the men of other religion they with

⁴ Ibid., 85.

awesome courage faced their own death allowing their own men to cut their throats on jumped in fire. Such incidences also point towards the closing of walls for women where they had no choice except to face death because once abducted or raped their restoration in social system was impossible. They would not be recognized by their own families, if they had a stigmatized past. Women who survived faced the same insensitivity, therefore their rehabilitation became the most difficult and neglected task. If woman is seen as a property, the effective way of penalizing a section is to snatch away and violate his property. "This kind of large scale violation of women with rape used as an instrument of revenge upon men has been widely experienced in situations of ethnic violence."⁵

Ritu Menon and Kamla Basin in the section "Honorably dead" write about the injury inflicted on women by men of both communities. They write,

We began to discern some specific features of communal crimes against women: their brutality, their extreme sexual violence and their collective nature. The range of sexual violation explicit in the above accounts stripping; parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding the breasts; knifing open the womb; raping, of course; killing fetuses is shocking not only for its savagery, but for what it tells us about women as objects in male constructions of their own honor. Women sexuality symbolizes "manhood"; its desecration is a matter of such shame and dishonor that it has to be avenged... Tattooing and branding the body with "Pakistan Zindabad" or "Hindistan Zindabad" not only mark the woman for life, they never allow her (or her family or community) the possibly of forgetting her humiliation... Marking the breasts and genitalia with symbols like crescent moon or trident makes permanent the sexual appropriation of the woman and symbolically extends this violation to future generations who are thus metaphorically stigmatized.⁶

Urvashi Butalia in her section "A Tradition of Martyrdom" gives evidences that lots of women and children were killed or rather offered themselves in front of their family for death because they preferred death to rape or conversion. For all this killing by own people word "Martyr", is used emphasizing that the race of Sikhs is fearless. The only feared "dishonor" is caught by Muslims. They felt pride in giving up their lives. There is no record of such women and children in which their families were responsible for their death. The question of "abducted women" entered a realm of silence whereas women who were killed by families or took their own life entered realm of "martyrdom".

Among many incidences of violence narrated in the works taken up and recorded one finds how women in that moment of crises can be seen caught into the web of authority and modestly constructed families. "This created world has located itself in the power of man and the subordination to women. This intent has been camouflaged by other myths—myths of protection, of punishment for transgression, and of power of women, their indispensability and the glory of motherhood."⁷ An example of it is the story of Dr. Versa Singh from Shekhupura.

Versa Singh claimed he had shot 50 women personally. First, he shot his own wife, because the Muslims came to get them. Once he had done this, all the women in the neighbourhood gathered around, saying "Viran Pehle Mannu Maar, Pehle Mannu Maar". (Brother kill me first). Some would push their daughters forward saying "Shoot her, put a bullet through her now". He says he just keep shooting and shooting "They kept bringing them forward I kept shooting. There was shooting all around. At least 50 women I shot my wife my mother, daughter." I used to talk to him about it, ask him how he had killed like this. He would say "How could I see my wife, my daughter fall into the hands of Muslims? I

⁵ Kosambi, Meera. "'Tradition' 'Modernity' and 'Violence' against Women" In Shirin Kudchedkar and Sabiha al-Issa eds. *Violence against Women, Women against Violence* (Delhi: Pencraft. 1998), 25.

⁶ Menon, Ritu and Kamala Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women. 2000), 43-44.

⁷ Jain, Jasbir. *Women in Patriarchy: Cross Cultural Readings* (Jaipur: Rawat. 2011), 13.

recalled Sikh history, the bravery of our people I wasn't a murder, I was their savior". I said to him "This must be a terrible burden for you to bear". He said, "Not at all, no burden. He subsequently remarried, had children and wrote a book about it, called Bhuler da Saka".⁸

With this there are scores of incidents when women took their own lives, swallowing poison, jumping off the bridge etc. The narrators of the incidents like Iqbal do not even acknowledge the role of men in women deaths. Though he himself strangled his cousin but repeatedly said that decision were theirs as they had no choice if their men who were their protectors were going to be killed. Iqbal's wife meaningfully interjected her husband saying "They must have encouraged them. After all what could ladies do in this situation? They must have persuaded them, what could the women do?"⁹ Social cognitive theory analyzes this as "when collective efforts fail to produce quick results or meet forcible opposition, their vulnerability to discouragement, and the social changes they are able to realize."¹⁰ Such incidences project more than this. One becomes aware of how caste plays an important part in gender role. Sikhism has its own history, it is based on boldness and military strength. Performing the role of protectors or offering oneself to martyrdom has been a common feature of this race. Such heavy qualities that were associated with men can be seen manifested in women at that time that was a "gendered reality" that "project a perceptive interpretation of the priorities for a human being over and about sexual role models. The individual self-respect, self-assertion and conscience via-a-vie the code of respectability are important".¹¹ Therefore, if Hindu woman was abducted, she felt she had become impure and not worthy of showing their face in public whereas Muslim women did not feel like this. This was not in their blood. Even with their men, there was no problem of their women's purity and they felt no hesitation in taking them back.

Displacement, Loss and Social Boundaries

There were thousands of women taken away by the abductors never to be found. During rehabilitation in some of the poor women was seen disillusionment with regard to going back to their original families, because their abductors were providing them materialistically better life style. Moreover, they questioned their reacceptance in the family. Women were forced to give up those children they had with a man of other religion. Pregnant women were sent to be cleansed or to places where they have their children and offer them in orphanages for adoptions. Still there are many women in ashrams who suffer double dislocation whose histories are hidden like "a child of history with no history". Jasbir Jain raises lots of questions with regard to construction for women's "self" and many other women related issues. She writes,

In this opposition between the self and the role, the body plays a significant role. The sexual act and the ensuring pregnancy emphasize the physicality of life, thus it is by negotiating these realities that women can find themselves. Negotiation does not mean rejection. It means a rearrangement, but the physical realities are worked out at another level, that of homelessness.¹²

The stories undertaken at times supplement each other or sometimes may prove counter points, because in the recovery process, woman as a person did not matter. All that mattered was national honor or honor of

⁸ Menon, Ritu and Kamala Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women. 2000), 49-50.

⁹ Ibid., 51.

¹⁰ Sinha, Narendra Pratap. *Psychology of Gender and Sexuality* (New Delhi: DPS. 2011), 120.

¹¹ Jain, Jasbir. *Feminizing Political Discourse: Women and the Novel in India 1857-1905*. (Jaipur: Rawat. 1997), 102.

¹² Jain, Jasbir and Supriya Agarwal eds., *Gender and Narrative* (Jaipur: Rawat. 2002), 192.

community. They were not expected to voice their opinion, because they were in mental oppressed condition. Even if true they had no freedom of choice but to leave “other” not acceptable families and get relocated in real ones.

In the culture that gives a lot of importance to women chastity, women are forced to give up their lives in order to avoid sexual violence and preserve honor of their community: As men give logic that they can fight, use their strengths but women can become impure by being impregnated with the seed of other religion and give birth to impure children. Its on them that lies the weight of “notion of respectability, the custodian ship of culture, the purity of lineage has come to rest on female body”¹³ and men are considered as strong creatures. The writers through the narration of partition survivors try to articulate women experience in patriarchal society. It is not only about reading the past, it also represents the mechanism how such gendered conduct was regulated. It deals with how one is extremely guided and directs oneself to gendered linked conducts and regulates one’s actions accordingly. They are evidences of “socially guided control over gender linked conduct”.¹⁴

In the rehabilitation process, the women that came from Pakistan looked mentally disturbed as if dumped. They came with their children almost dying and looked like skeletons. Some were pregnant and they had to stay in camp to have child as go for abortions these women were reluctant to show their faces to their families “They wanted to burn themselves alive or die rather than face their people. They said they would rather go to hell.”¹⁵ There are innumerable incidents where women refused to be relocated, but they were pushed by both the governments to go back to their original families. These women were looked at not as individuals with their own will, but Hindu women or Muslim women. There are incidents about Hindu girls kept by Muslim men who were happy and well adjusted following own religion in a Muslim family, but were soon identified and ruptured from their settled condition of being emotionally attached with Muslim husband and having three children. This was heartbreaking for women who faced such situation in 1957-58 ten years after partition. They protested because they had almost achieved their individual adjustment with life and started living again. One recovered girl confronted Mridula Sarabhai thus;

You say abduction is immoral and so you are trying to save us. Well, now its too late. One marries only once—willingly or by force. We are now married—what are you going to do with us? Ask us to get married again? Is that not immoral? What happened to our relatives when we were abducted? Where were they? You may do your worst if you insist but remember, you can kill us, but we will not go.¹⁶

Conclusion

After 66 years of partition, much has changed within both the countries but borders have not disappeared. The cultural and social borders between Hindus and Muslims exist. Both the works provide a discourse between personal and social world; the challenge women faced sexually and control on their movement towards their home or away from home. At one level, Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* and Ritu Menon’s & Kamala Bhasin’s *Borders and Boundaries* are deeply interlaced with historical references a constructing of two nations and contextualized in actual happenings, but on the other hand, they deal with real problems, hundreds and thousands of women faced in the complex social system. The literary history interacts

¹³ Jain, Jasbir. *Women in Patriarchy: Cross Cultural Readings* (Jaipur: Rawat. 2011), 14.

¹⁴ Sinha, Narendra Pratap. *Psychology of Gender and Sexuality* (New Delhi: DPS. 2011), 129.

¹⁵ Menon, Ritu and Kamala Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women. 2000), 83.

¹⁶ Ibid., 97.

with political history opening events for reader by two narrators author and the character who is narrator. These works create a realistic picture of social, cultural and mental boundaries that still exist and have filtered down to generations through memory of survivors. Women experience of partition is a painful truth worsening or improving with the course of time.

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