

Partition and Women: A Study of Rajinder Singh Bedi's Story "Lajwanti"

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Abstract

The Partition of the erstwhile undivided India was an event the implications of which exceeded by far the simple cartographical act. It became an instrument not only of geographical separation between two peoples belonging to two communities for whom two separate states – India and Pakistan – were thought necessary. It became also an instrument of dissolution and fragmentation of smaller units and bonds of people within each community, affecting both social and private life of individuals. Much of the above transpired through the abduction, rape and (true or mal-) rehabilitation of women – an easy target of the male desire and male power. This is graphically illustrated through the marital relationship of Sunderlal and "Lajwanti", i.e. the name of the female protagonist in Rajinder Singh Bedi's story of that name. In this story about space Lajwanti journeys from the rural to the urban space, then from the domestic space out into the social space and back to the domestic space, ultimately being cast out from there, to be confined only to her private space. Resisting her fate at none of these phases, she is a new avatar of Sita projected by Bedi for recognition. The irony of the situation is that she understands her loss, her "eviction" by Sunderlal but her husband lacks the awareness both of his failure and her love/fidelity – which means the same to him. Though he changes himself a lot, the story is a variety of female bildungsroman tangentially offering a male bildungsroman that goes halfway through.

Lajwanti alias Lajo is an Indian woman whose life was impacted by the great political event – the Partition of the erstwhile undivided India. This act of cartography had been a tsunami, playing havoc with the lives and property of innumerable people, throwing all stability and mental peace to the winds... But women were its special victims. "Lajwanti" is a story by Rajinder Singh Bedi, which holds a mirror to the plight of women during the Partition and its aftermath.

To be more accurate, it is a story about *the space available to them*. Bedi has traced the process of the cartographical separation assuming increasingly larger, other dimensions, so that it not only separates the people of *one* nation geographically. It becomes a narrative of political-religious-economic-cultural-domestic space, and even more importantly, the personal space of self-definition. The phenomenon enters into relationships of every description, thus marshalling the interactive space of society and its miniature—in family—within its purview. Bedi foregrounds the plight of the Indian segment, while signalling clearly that

the scenario cannot be different in the Pakistani segment.

Bedi maintains the outer, wider groove of spatial interrogation in terms of a radius of recurrent focussing on the social and the domestic space of women, in particular on their familial & marital relationships affected inevitably by the Partition. The female protagonist Lajo gets separated from her husband, as she fails to become the wife she had been. By becoming "Devi" instead of the former "Lajo", she has lost her human identity. Her husband "*made her feel as if she was precious and fragile like glass, that she would shatter at the slightest touch*" (36), and this prevented their revealing to each other the innermost feelings and resuming thereby the link snapped by forces external to them. She has not been turned out of the house, so she escapes being traded in the flesh market like cattle as indeed other hapless women, rejected by their kith and kin, are. But, does she, *really*?

Prior to her deification and re-entry into the domestic space (albeit not as a *human being*) she has undergone a commodification, too. Lal Chand reports about some arguments between the Indian and Pakistani volunteers at the Wagah border during the second exchange of women about the worth of these 'commodities':

Our volunteers objected that most of the women the Pakistanis had sent back were old, middle-aged, and utterly useless... Then one of their volunteers pointed at Lajo Bhabhi and said, 'Is this one old? Look at her... Look... Have you returned any woman who is as beautiful as she is?' Lajo Bhabhi stood there trying to hide her tattoo marks from the curious gaze of people... Both sides threatened to take back their 'goods'... (32-33).

The coarseness of the patriarchal male's demand upon/expectation from the female en masse inevitably creates a bluntness of thought. What Laura Brown has said about Belinda in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, loosely identifying her situation with the post-industrial capitalist situation may be applied to Lajo and others of her ilk in the postcolonial (as also the post-industrial capitalist) context. The starting point of the story is two third world countries newly gaining independence by virtue of the one undivided India being treated as so much *movable* property by the colonizers who divided this property at their sweet will. The exploitative policy of the colonialist- capitalist West grabbing geographically available blank spaces and occupying them, or pouncing upon inhabited/occupied spaces, *edging out/ invisibilizing* the inhabitants and then treating the spaces as blank ones all the same, and in any case treating the human beings upon these spaces as usable livestock/labour power, is so pervasive that it may be said to have percolated through the cultures of the colonized peoples of the two countries of the East, who are *mimicking* their erstwhile rulers. The imperial/geographical colonization is on the back foot right at the moment, though the mercantile/cultural colonization is quite dominant and will continue to

be so long afterwards. In the absence of any more land to be grabbed immediately, it is as if the peoples of the two newborn countries seek to possess the 'goods' of each other as much as is possible during the riots: houses, landed property, ornaments and all other usable valuables, and, last but not the least, women. It may be said that at this juncture the story *"identifies her [women in general and Lajo in particular] in terms of the products of mercantilist expansion, and it begins to develop a rhetoric of the commodity... a language of commodity fetishism where objects become the only reality"* (13).

Sunderlal rescues her from this commodity status in the social space by restoring to her the lost domestic space. But then her treatment there as a goddess, on the other hand, makes her an "untouchable". *Through her restoration* she loses her own bona fide identity as Sunderlal's wife perhaps not for the majority of people of the locality, but for *him and for herself* as well. And this is what counts. How did it happen? Fear, suspicion on Lajo's part and disappointment and some doubts on Sunderlal's part made them unknown and unknowable to each other, reducing them to strangers... A principle that has to be upheld for the greater, public interest had also wedged itself between them.

Sunderlal was elected the secretary to the committee campaigning for the implementation of the rehabilitation programme for women who had been abducted and raped during the partition and the riots entailed, because his own wife had been abducted. Being full of remorse for his mistreatment of Lajwanti in their marital life, Sunderlal put his heart into the rehabilitation programme: *"he began to sympathize with the sufferings of others and immersed himself in service to them"* (25). In the process, he came to learn that people had fragile, sensitive natures which could easily be hurt by "a careless word". They were *as delicate as the lajwanti plant*. Tormented by memories of his wife, he had sworn to honour Lajo *"and give her a place in my heart"* if ever he could find her again. But he had a suffering woman in mind at that time. He *"was shocked"* to see that *"Lajo looked healthier than before"* (34).

This was the crux of the matter: Sunderlal could not digest the idea of Lajo's feeling *comfortable* in captivity, among the Muslims of Pakistan. His ego was touched to the quick by the fact that being separated from her husband, being raped by strangers had not *"reduced her to a mere skeleton"*! It was a startling revelation to him *"that she had been well treated in Pakistan"* (34). He even noticed the Muslim style of wearing her dupatta. Stung by jealousy, he had felt that her return to India was not voluntary, but merely the result of a Governmental policy. However, he did not rebuke her *for apparently having been happy*. Remembering his vow to himself he simply, silently took her back. Here was sown the seed of misunderstanding between them.

Lajo, too, found out that by returning home *"she had lost everything"* (36). When they had met at the police station she could read his eyes and understood that he misunderstood her, *"that he had failed to read the*

signs of pain and humiliation in her face" (34). What he saw as *her gain in weight coming through mental peace and a sense of contentment* was actually a mere sign of ageing, a slackening of muscles. Moreover, her excitement at meeting her husband at long last, feverish restlessness about the prospect of it mingled with nervous anxiety and fear about how he is possibly going to receive her, had brought about that *bright glow in her complexion*. Perhaps the one hope of seeing him again someday had kept the flame of life burning in her so far, even though the fear had been lurking deep within that he might do all sorts of things to her in anger, as punishment. Out of that desperate longing it was that she had learned to imitate the women she had lived with – in the hope of evading her captors some day.

But he fails to see her 'anxious self-denial' which is the ultimate product of a female education as per expectation, according to Gilbert and Gubar (276). Earlier, in the pre-Partition days he had seen but failed to appreciate this. Though theirs had been a marriage of love, nonetheless it had its due quota of conventionally accepted/sanctioned abuse, by Sunderlal, of his better half. There was a popular folksong about it; Lajo often hummed the tune to herself in her *comparatively better*, pre-partition days. He had begun

to treat her even more cruelly and lost sight of the limit,
beyond which the patience of any human being breaks.
Lajwanti herself was, perhaps, responsible for the blurring of
these limits... (25)

But in the post Partition days when he missed his wife, Sunderlal made himself grow out of his habit of mistreating, beating Lajo. Ironically, it resulted in the 'social castration' of Lajo through an unseeing, unfeeling Sunderlal who had turned her into the site of application of a doctrine. Soon after the *queen of his home* had returned, he wanted to know how the 'other' male had kept her in Pakistan. It is as if somebody else being able to *keep her well without mistreatment of any kind* took away his sense of possession. Also, the knowledge of her being passionately in love with him *earlier* in spite of everything, combined with the supposition *at present* that she has had no urge to return to him, disabled his power of loving her. That gave a strange look to his eyes. Which dissuaded Lajo when she wanted to express her deeper feelings in this matter – to tell him that she had always loved him, in spite of his harshness, mistreatment and cruelty in general. But the slave woman now being adored like a goddess by none other than the same tyrannical, self-assured husband reversed the roles in their marital relationship which was resisted by him, *unconsciously*, though like Duke Orsino in *Twelfth Night* he is in love with the idea of loving his wife. Having taken her back in all kindness, he earned prestige in the locality as a sincere social worker true to his word. But having kept his pledge to himself of never again mistreating Lajo, he could not lead a normal, passionate marital life (often bordering on triviality) of the mainstream society with a

“Devi”. The love or adoration that should have been bestowed on his “poor, suffering” wife had to be poured somewhere; he laid it at the altar of the social service – a cause. One is reminded also of the episode in the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* where a female Yahoo embarrasses Gulliver by virtually trying to ‘rape’ him. The issue of “penis envy” – a Freudian term in the discourse of emancipatory politics as expounded by Elizabeth Janeway is relevant in this context:

In Freud's time the advantages enjoyed by the male sex over the inferior female were, of course, even greater than at present, and they were also accepted to a much larger extent, as being inevitable, inescapable. Women were evident social castrates, and the mutilation of their potentiality as achieving human creatures was quite analogous to the physical wound (58).

Just as Sunderlal publicly and consciously enacted the role of Ramchandra in taking her back, in the deepest niche of his heart he enacted secretly but unconsciously a variant of the other role of Ramchandra, viz. driving her out of his mind though certainly not out of his home. Ramchandra had continued to cherish Sita's memory as his lawful wife though *in public interest* he felt compelled to send her into exile.

The references to Ramchandra and Sita are recurring and multiple in the story. Lajo is a new avatar of Sita projected by Bedi for recognition. She represents the “malleable and changeable “ nature of “*female sexuality (indeed, heterosexuality in general)*” argued for by Juliet Mitchell in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) that Freud presents as “*formed by early experiences and adjustments...*” (referred to in Barry, 130-1). From the perspective of myth criticism one sees in this leitmotif an image of a sacrificial sacred animal or person – a scapegoat – whose ostracism or death or removal is necessary for the whole state (both natural and human). Sir J.G. Frazer has discussed at length with ample illustrations in vol.2 of his book *The Golden Bough* (1922) the transference of evil, the public expulsion of evils and public scapegoats as instanced in various magical beliefs and practices among primitive peoples of the world, including the peoples of Cambodia and Bali and Sumatra, the Chinese and the Burmese, people of the East Indian islands, the Dinkas of the White Nile, the Incas of Peru, the negroes of Guinea as also prevalent among the heathen of Europe and in Christian Europe, and certainly, the modern 'scientifically oriented' inhabitants of the world. He traces human scapegoats in classical antiquity; and makes frequent references to the “Hindoos” and the peoples of various zones of India in this connection. His findings as well as the insights of the Cambridge Hellenists point to the aptness of Bedi's development and deployment of this exclusively indigenous mythical image, for making a literary statement: Lajo's deification, virtually *her banishment*, helps maintain the status quo in Sunderlal's world, as in Ramrajya. Herein one notices the

author's determined participation, in what Frantz Fanon had prescribed as the third phase in "*the movement of the native intellectual and writer toward a more integrated role in the creation of a national culture*", involving "*three phases. In...the third, he finally identifies himself with the native masses, whose consciousness he begins to shape*" (referred to in Hawley, 167).

A balance is thus struck between the domestic space (the barrier of which had been crossed) and the social space. This is how Lajo's journey through life can be traced: from the rural to the urban space through marriage, then driven from the private to the social space through the Partition— reaching a point of no return, but again rescued from the social to the domestic space; finally, being cast out from there, to remain confined to her own private space.

Lajwanti frequently reminds one of another Indian woman victim of the Partition — Salima Bano in Kamleshwar Prasad Saxena's story "How Many Pakistans?" Though she had not been abducted and raped by the alien men of another country, she also suffered what Kate Millett has called "internal colonization" by the male folk of her own Indian patriarchal society, like Lajwanti. Her countrymen turned out to be alien also — sometimes because they were Hindus, and sometimes also because they were Muslims. But that is another story.

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