

Partition and Women: A Trauma Untold

- Sravasti Guha Thakurta

Abstract: The social, the personal aspects of Partition-how lives were lost, how women were physically abused, how they coped and rebuilt their lives-are most often than not, neglected in history textbooks. Women have traditionally been assigned a place outside history because they have been perceived as being outside the public and the political. This paper explores the commoditization of women during partition.

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Partition, for the people who were directly affected by it-that is, the people residing in the states of Bengal and Punjab-was synonymous with violence. Urvashi Butalia, in an article entitled "Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency during Partition", published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, has quoted the firsthand experiences of the victims of the Partition: "It was only after the riots started that people began to recognize that Independence had come, Partition had occurred, India and Pakistan had been established," said Rashiduddin Khan, ... "To tell you the truth, it was only in the bloodshed of Partition that ordinary people saw the shape of independence." (EPW 1997: 2262) It was only after the riots started that a lot of people realised that Independence had come, and Partition had occurred. These two cataclysmic events brought along with them killing, rape, arson and finally, migration on an unprecedented scale. History has dutifully recorded the events of 1947; but, there exists a wide chasm between the historians' perception of Partition and its subsequent fallout, and the actual survivor's memory of the trauma of it all, his personal account of it. Historians themselves have realised the importance of filling up this gap, and as a result, there has been a "decisive shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the concrete message to its subjective representation..." (Nora 1996: 10) In Punjab, the villages of Thamali and Thoa Khalsa deserve special mention in this context. In both these cases entire villages had been massacred by violent mobs. Rather than surrendering to the attackers the women jumped into wells and drowned themselves. Men severed the heads of their womenfolk, made them touch electric wires, in an effort to preserve the 'honour' of the family and the community. Women were subjected to violence by both men of their community and men of the 'other' community. Deliberating on such events, Mahatma Gandhi commented:

I have heard that many women did not want to lose their honour and chose to die. Many men killed their own wives. I think that is really great because I know that such things make India brave. After all, life and death is a transitory game. Whoever might have died are dead and gone; but at least they have gone with courage. They have not sold away their honour. Not that their lives were not dear to them,

but they felt it was better to die with courage rather than be forcibly converted to Islam by the Muslims and allow them to assault their bodies. And so those women died. They were not just a handful, but quite a few. When I hear all these things, I dance with joy that there are such brave women in India. (Gandhi 1958-94: 202)

The scenario in the eastern sector was not much different—here also incidents of arson, rape, and abduction of women were widespread—women as always, from time immemorial, occupied the central position in all enactments of violence. However, incidents of honour killings were not very common in this part of the country. “The figure of the abducted woman became symbolic of crossing borders, of violating social, cultural and political boundaries.” (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 20). This concentrated and extended violence against women was strangely enough, glorified all around. ‘Unparalleled sacrifices’ of ‘our women’ were celebrated all around. At the same time, boastful talks of the capture, disfiguring, rape and humiliation of the ‘other’s’ women were listened to with great admiration. In some cases, the ‘other’s’ women were later made into ‘our’ women, adopted, married and settled into the ‘victorious’ community. “Women do not have any religion after all (...auraton ka to koi dharam hi nahin hota).” (Mayaram 1997: 191). A woman is thought of as ‘belonging’ to a man, and therefore bearing the stamp of his caste, nationality, and religion. She has no caste, nationality, religion—the basic constituents of an individual human identity—which she can call her own. Yet, it appears from the incidents of 1947 that although women themselves had no caste, nationality, or religion, they embodied all these things. During Partition, women were divided between countries, bartered like commodities. They were classified as Hindu, Muslim, Sikh; minor; legitimate or illegitimate; abducted or not; forcibly converted or voluntarily married; and divided between the two countries accordingly. They had no choice whatsoever in the matter—no country was their own, their bodies, treated as valuable commodities—also they could not call their own. This commoditisation of women is also mentioned by Jill Didur in her book *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory*. (Didur 2007: 7). The social, the personal aspects of Partition—how lives were lost, how women were physically abused, how they coped and rebuilt their lives—are most often than not, neglected in history textbooks. As Sujala Singh comments:

...even as they [Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, Veena Das, Gyanendra Pandey] critique the closures of the historiographic narratives and recognize the absences that such accounts enforce, they seem to suggest that literature might be able to breach this repression. (Singh 2000: 126)

Prafulla Roy’s story “Boatman” (“Majhi”), brings into focus the plight of an abducted young woman—the unnamed woman, who once refers to herself as the ‘weaver’s wife’, has been abducted by Yasin Shikdar. Shikdar, we learn, as the story progresses, has murdered the woman’s husband and snatched her away—like many others, he has taken advantage of the turbulent situation all around to achieve his own objective. The abducted woman, all of whose relatives have fled to West

Bengal, pleads with Sikhdar to let her go, but in vain. Sikhdar instead chides her, telling her that she should thank him for taking her away with him, for had he not done so, Keramat Dakui, the betel nut trader would have taken her instead, and she would have led a dog's life with Dakui; now she can look forward to a life of comfort and luxury as Sikhdar's chief Begum. When the woman reiterates that she would rather drown in the waters of the Dhaleshwari River, which they were crossing, than bear intimacy with any man other than her husband, Sikhdar reiterates: "How long will the taste of a former husband last? You'll now live life with a new husband. You'll feel better." (Fraser 2008: 185) A woman, as I had argued earlier, is viewed by men as without religion, without feelings, without loyalty—any of the parameters by which a human being is essentially defined. And that is why, Sikhdar, in the face of the woman's impassioned cry for freedom, or even death, can smugly assure her that she will soon feel "better". And when the woman continues to plead with Sikhdar, appealing to him as a Godfather, Yasin Sikhdar retorts in an ugly manner: "I'm not your father, girl. I'd like to be your child's father." ((Fraser 2008: 185) This is a comment which very neatly encapsulates the predominant patriarchal point of view from which women were routinely looked at. As mentioned earlier, women, conceptualised as symbols of honour of a nation, were routinely raped, abducted and mutilated by male members of the 'other' nation, in an attempt to communicate their victory over the nation. Women's bodies, thus commoditised, became a mode of communication between the two warring communities.

Narendranath Mitra's story "Illegitimate" ("Jaiba"), concentrates on one such abducted and subsequently recovered woman, Sudatta. Sudatta was in Lahore when the riots broke out in North India. Amidst the violence that raged all around, Sudatta was abducted by members of the opposite community. Several months elapsed before Sudatta was eventually recovered from a small state. By that time she was already pregnant. Her scientist husband, Professor Mriganka Majumdar, was sympathetic to her condition, but Sudatta herself could not accept the fact that her body had been forcibly occupied by a man who she did not even know, a man belonging to the other community who had used force to occupy her body, and had eventually managed to leave an indelible mark on it by impregnating her. Like the unnamed abducted weaver's wife in Prafulla Roy's "Boatman", Sudatta was powerless to put up any kind of an effective fight against the violence of the circumstances which finally overpowered her. Women's bodies are like the lush, fertile earth, and whosoever can occupy it, even if that be forcefully, against her will, will try to do so—by colonising the womb, the victorious man will succeed in valorising his own community and vanquishing the glory of the other community. Sudatta's mental anguish at this illegitimate conception was such that she desperately searched for means to empty her womb. However, her pregnancy was much too advanced for medical practitioners to consider a termination of it, and she was forced to bear the trauma of having to carry around a burden which was not of her choosing. Women have traditionally been assigned a place outside

history because they have been perceived as being outside the public and the political. It is only by a rupture of the divide between the personal and the political, and by demonstrating that as far as women are concerned, the personal is political that women can claim and validate the importance of the experiential dimension of any historical event. And herein lies the importance of Partition literature, especially those which centre around women characters. They raise questions about the actions of the people involved, the governments involved; they offer us a glimpse into the unwritten history of the period, an in depth study of which is essential if Partition, that cataclysmic event which changed the lives of millions is to be comprehended in its entirety.

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