

Unveiling Identity:

Effect of Partition on the Female Identity in Indian Partition Narratives

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“The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped”¹

Nothing would be more apt than Khuswant Singh’s depiction of the Partition scenario in his opening chapter of *The Train to Pakistan*. The partition of India both the East and the West has a massive influence on men and women of both the countries. The women suffered the worst excesses of Partition. The women were tortured by men of ‘Other’ religious communities and as a result their identity was challenged every now and then. Numerous women were abducted, raped, led to naked parades, murdered and forced to marry men of other communities. The question of identity is a challenging domain in Feminist discourses. The partition has an extensive impact on the identity of women.

According to the Feminist discourse the term ‘women’ denotes a common identity. Feminist critic Judith Butler is of the opinion that the identity of women is a cause of anxiety:

Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, women even in the plural have become troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause of anxiety.²

Thus the identity of women has never been a stable one, and it is especially true in case of women affected by Partition, whose identity has been ever changing, and is of course a cause of extreme anxiety.

Bapsi Sidhwa has focussed her attention on the theme of Partition in the *Ice Candy Man*. The novel quite poignantly shows the impact of Partition on women through the character of ‘Ayah’ in *Ice Candy Man* is denied a proper name throughout the novel. The narrator

mentioned her name, 'Shanta' rarely. But throughout the novel she is addressed to as 'Ayah'. Her identity is constructed from the only fact that she hailed from the Punjabi community, and that she was a nanny to a crippled child 'Lenny'. From the beginning of the novel, she is projected as the 'object of desire' for the men of all communities. Ayah's 'chocolate chemistry' made her excessively seductive and she was surrounded by admirers always. Lenny, the child narrator was also very much aware of the fact that men from all communities would hover around her. She says: "I have confidence in Ayah's chocolate chemistry."³

Her description was given from the perspective of her admirers. Her 'chocolate chemistry' even caught the attention of the Englishmen:

And, as if her looks were not stunning enough, she has a rolling bouncy walk that agitates the globules of her buttocks under her cheap colourful saris and half-spheres beneath her short sari blouses. The Englishmen no doubt had noticed.⁴

Throughout the novel her identity remains a mystery. She is the object of violence. She is forcefully turned into a prostitute. Her identity changes from a 'Hindu' to a 'Muslim'. Ice Candy man marries her. Her attire too changes as a result of this. In the beginning the sartorial politics is worth noticing here. The sartorial politics portrayed in the character of Ayah. In the beginning she is found clad only in saris. Towards the end of the novel her attire is that of a typical Muslim woman:

And then Ayah comes: teetering on high heels, tripping on the massive divided skirt of her garara, jangling gold bangles. Her eyes are lowered and her head draped in gold fringed and gauzy red ghoonghat. A jewelled tika nestles on her forehead and bunches of pearls and gold dangles from her ears.⁵

Ayah's natural chemistry changes to 'rouged lipsticked look'. It is also at this point of time she is named 'Mumtaz' which is of course a Muslim name. The novel portrays the journey

of Ayah from 'Shanta' to 'Mumtaz' which deliberately shows a change of identity of the partition affected women whose identity is the source of endless trouble. This change of identity is the result of communal violence leading to women becoming the site of violence during the Partition. As the novel ends with the note that Ayah vanishes 'across the Wagah border into India' we are left to the confusion regarding the re-establishment of her identity.

Urvashi Butalia, cofounder of *Kali for Women*, voices the different aspects of West Indian Partition in her work *The Other side of Silence*. Her work is the product of several years of toil. She primarily chooses the medium of oral narratives to pen the different voices of Partition. Being a Feminist, she deals with problematic issues like *Women* or *Honour* and allots separate chapters for this. Not only interviews but she also looked at 'diaries, memoirs, newspaper reports and the kind documents' that she feels important for her work. She even deals with letters written by different people, reports of enquiry Commission, and pamphlets and 'of course books'. She has reconstructed all these. She asks a critical question: "Is there such a thing, then as a gendered telling of Partition?"⁶

Basically what she does in her work is really a 'gendered reading' of Partition specifically in chapters like *Women* and *Honour*. The identity of women in and the aftermath of Partition is a problematic issue. With location, the names, family, attires of women has been constantly changing. Women during the partition were known as *OUR WOMEN YOUR WOMEN*. The problem specifically was faced by the rescued and rehabilitated women. Through the narrative of Damyanti Sahgal, Butalia upholds the condition and several issues associated with women during the partition. Damyanti Sahgal, who worked for the rescue of women (whom we find in *The Other Side of Silence*, one of Butalia's narrators), had a wide range of experience during the partition. It was the crucial time when the identities of majority of women were reduced to 'Rehabilitated Women'. The problem, which these women faced were unique. Their identity was associated with the sense of 'purity'. Damyanti finds that:

Apparently abducted Muslim women were more easily accepted back into their families, and in Pakistan, the All Pakistan Women's Association and other Organisations, worked hard arranging for marriages for many women who were recovered and returned. For Hindu, purity could, it seemed, more easily be accepted if the woman was alone, but if she had children, it became a different story altogether.⁷

There were even mass abortions or 'Safaya' (as it was called) in certain cases. These were done to restore the 'identity' of those abducted women which were lost. The Ashram also became 'permanent homes' for women. The sense of loss of homeland led to the loss of identity. Some women according to Butalia even suffered "double dislocation". Hence the dislocation and the relocation of the women is a major force that problematizes the 'identity' question of the Partition affected women.

Urvashi Butalia amply shows how the identity of women is associated with the sense of 'honour'. During the partition women lost their identity. Most of the abducted women lost their homes, as Butalia mentioned that many women were untraceable and others had already settled down in their new homes. One burning problem of the day that Butalia traces is related to the resistance of women on being recovered. Those women were denied their right to exercise their choice of citizenship as Butalia quotes Gopaldaswamy Ayyangar: "Women or abducted persons are rescued from surroundings which", he said 'prima facie do not give them liberty to make a free choice as regards their own lives.'⁸

The abducted women were bound to accept that they were not free. This subversion of women by the patriarchal forces is one of the very crucial factors that feminist discourses deal with. Gyanendra Pandey's historical work on Partition named *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* where he stated a similar thing about the abducted women: "Many abducted women, separated from their husbands, fathers, other male and

female relatives, for a few days, or weeks or months, found it difficult to gain acceptance back in their original families and communities.”⁹

The theme of resistance is also an important issue with the surviving women of the partition. Butalia finds that women who resisted being recovered had to succumb against their will. Thus their desperate attempt to establish their identity failed. The identity of women was really a complex issue. Some abducted women actually wanted to stay with their abductors. The loss of Pakistan as a result of partition can be related to the loss of a part of the body of India to the other Nation. The Nation considered as the ‘Mother’ or ‘Bharatmata’ suffered a violation, which in turn can be related to the violation that the woman body faced in the form of rape, abduction, murder and other atrocities. Butalia traces the popular image: “The picture carried by the Organizer, with the woman’s body mapping the territory of India, and Nehru cutting off one arm which represented Pakistan, is a powerful graphic reminder of this.”¹⁰

Afsaneh Najmabadi in her paper *The Erotic Vatan (Homeland) as Beloved and Mother: To Love, To Possess, and To Protect* mentions: “In nationalist discourse representing the homeland as a female body has often been used to construct a national identity based on male bonding among a nation of brothers.”¹¹

One aspect of women’s identity is her identity as a mother. The abducted women were considered impure and Butalia raises a pertinent question: “How could motherhood be thus defiled?”¹²

From the historic times women faced oppression. Her identity was challenged. She was considered as the ‘Other’, the Male being considered the ‘Self’. The surviving women of Partition were no exception to this. As stated earlier in the paper that they were denied the right of choice of their citizenship. Butalia amply states: “The assumption was that even if asked for their opinion, women would not be able to voice an independent one because they were in situations of oppression”¹³

Judith Butler rightly says that gender is ‘culturally constructed’. She says that gender is a performative act. Women during and after the partition were generally seen mostly associated with the domestic chores. She was expected to be submissive. And as a result of the partition her identity was continuously constructed and reconstructed. The identity was constructed as binary to the men. Her identity was associated with the symbol of ‘honour’ for the family. Butalia states:

If colonialism provided Indian men the rationale for constructing and reconstructing the identity of the Hindu women as a ‘bhadramahila’, the good middle class Hindu wife and mother, supporter of her men, Independence, and its dark ‘other’. Partition provided the rationale for making women into the symbols of Nation’s honour.¹⁴

Thus her identity was constructed by the norms of patriarchy, considering her as a symbol of honour. As a result of they faced threats not only from men of their community but also from men of ‘Other’ community. Due to the fear of dishonour, men killed women of their community. Some women even committed suicide, even there were mass suicides and these women were considered as ‘martyrs’. This construction of identity of women as martyrs was also a result of patriarchal construction. The horrible experiences of women during the Partition were not always properly or adequately articulated by them. While interviewing women these women, Urvashi Butalia found that these women were not able to speak properly if their husbands or sons were around:

Much of the time the interview had to be conducted in the nooks and crannies of time that were available to women in between household tasks. Equally, if their husbands or sons were around, they tended to take over the interview, inadvertently or otherwise, making women lapse into a sort of silence.¹⁵

The pathetic incidents of migration, formation of refugee camps, rapes and murders created numerous horrifying memories. It was difficult for the women to forget them. The episodes of shame, of dishonour, of pain and of loss were something that always remained in their subconscious and as a result a long silence prevailed. It was this silence that Butalia tried to uncover in, *The Other Side of Silence*. Women dislocated due to partition had to indulge into forming her new identity and her new home. This effort is universal for the people who faced Partition and were utterly distressed due to it. This involved a feeling of forgetfulness of the gruesome past which included the horrible incidents of Partition. Frank Stewart mentioned in the Editor's Note in *Crossing Over, Partition Literature from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* said: "Collective amnesia has always served as a strategy for individuals, communities and nations."¹⁶

Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti*(1956) is a clear depiction of the post Partition scenario pathetically portraying the condition of the women, particularly who were abducted, recovered and rehabilitated. Bedi was a member of the Progressive Writer's Association. *Lajwanti*, provides the apt imagery of the touch me not plant which fold inward or droops with a single touch. Here the central character Lajwanti, justifies her name as she is as shy as the Lajwanti plant. Lajwanti, in the beginning is seen as 'a slender, naïve, village girl- supple and tender and fresh, like a young mulberry bush'. The story unearths the issue of the transformation of her identity from a Hindu to a Muslim and then again restoring into the Hindu family due to the Divide. The story starts off with the information of Lajwanti's abduction by a man of other religious community and Sunderlal's efforts to recover her. Soon after she is recovered and restored to her house with immense respect by her husband, Sunderlal, she finds nothing is same:

Sunderlal made her feel as if she was precious and fragile like glass, that she would shatter at the slightest touch...She began to gaze at herself in the mirror and came to the conclusion that she would never be Lajo again. She had returned home, but she had lost everything...Sunderlal had neither the eyes to see her tears nor the ears to hear her sobs...¹⁷

Lajwanti, is a literary reproduction of the history of Partition. Bedi quite clearly depicted the sad condition of women in the aftermath of Partition. The violence and atrocities faced by the women during Partition could not stop their indomitable courage to establish and re-establish their identity. The repression of the society, the attempts to reduce her identity simply as a commodity due to forceful marriage, abduction by men of other communities or even their own communities had a tremendous effect on the women who survived the partition. Such a crisis has an universal appeal.

According to Simone De Beauvoir one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one. Thus her identity is culturally constructed. The violence and atrocities faced by the women during Partition could not stop their indomitable courage to establish and reestablish their identity. The repression of the society, the attempts to reduce her identity simply as a commodity due to forceful marriage, abduction by men of other communities or even their own communities had a tremendous effect on the women who survived the partition. Hence it can be said that their identity has been numerously constructed, deconstructed and deconstructed. Such a crisis had an universal appeal; it is the same story everywhere as Deepika Bahri in her paper *Telling Tales* would say: "In fact, regardless of the identity of the women who suffered the torture, those bodies, then parts, the shame and the pain in some sense belong to us all."¹⁸

Notes and References

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