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Research Article



The Unhealing Scars: ‘Her’ Narratives of Partition

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Abstract

Literature reflects society in various ways. Displacement implies crisis of identity. The history of colonialism has occupied a large space in portraying the displacement of individuals across cultures. It has left a wound in everybody’s heart since driving an individual away from his/her native land is synonymous to deprive him/her of the right to breathe. Partition narratives form the part and parcel of displacement as a separate branch of studies. When a nation is fractured the trauma of losing one’s land creates a wound in the psyche and it has been contextualized

by various writers during the pre and post phases of partition. They have focused on the physical, mental, social and above all the psychological wounds of individuals who have lost their native land. The documentation of partition narratives is of various layers and gender discourse is a significant component of this. Partition has revealed the hidden wounds of women's bodies which have always been the site of oppression. They were abducted, raped, mutilated and they have been left as mere living beings. The present paper attempts to explore the effect of partition on women through the analysis of short stories written by Shobha Rao. Urvashi Butalia, Nivedita Menon, Kamla Bhasin have been extensively exploring the displacement of women in the context of partition and their narratives focus on the traumatic experiences of displacement and how that reduce their identities since they are merely considered as 'bodies'. Shobha Rao, known as an American novelist immigrating from India has extensively focused on women's oppression in various contexts. In the collection of short stories called *An Unrestored Woman* Rao is concentrating on the abducted women being returned to their own lands in the context of the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act in 1949. The proposed paper is going to examine Rao's texts in the context of partition to trace the nature of displacement, trauma and quest to find their own identity.

Keywords: Literature, Partition, Displacement, Crisis of Identity, Trauma, Text, Body Politics, Gender, Women, Abduction, Rape, Mutilation, Psychological wounds, Shobha Rao, Recovery, Restoration

Partition has drawn boundary line not only between the geographical locations; it has made splits to human beings too. Many narratives bear the scars of partition and Amrita Pritam being one of those who pens down the open wounds to explore the narratives in her own ways. The plight of abducted women has been a recurring theme in her writing. What she recounts in her autobiography *The Revenue Stamp* about partition is important to note—

At the time of the partition of the country in 1947, when all social, political and religious values came crashing down like glass smashed into smithereens under the feet of people in flight...Those crushed pieces of glass bruised my soul and my limbs bled. I wrote my hymns for the suffering of those who were abducted and raped. The passion of those times has been with me since, like some consuming fire-... (Pritam,16)

The idea of displacement bears negative connotations. Displacement has its nuances. The reasons for displacement may be various, a person being taken away from his/her own root, displacing him/her from the family, society, country. It involves a sense of trauma; it takes away one's sense of identity and often creates a psychological vacuum. Partition is one of the reasons for the displacement of human beings. It creates the feeling of being lost, traumatized, beaten, battered and losing one's identity. What finally remains is the scars. What Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin think of partition is relevant to mention here

How do we know partition except through the many ways in which it is transmitted to us, in its many representations: political, social, historical, testimonial, literary, documentary, even communal. We know it through national and family mythologies,

through collective and individual memory. Partition, almost uniquely, is the one event in our recent history in which familial recall and its encoding are a significant factor in any general construction of it. In a sense it is the collective memory of thousands of displaced families on both sides of the border that have imbued a rather innocuous word- partition- with its dreadful meaning: a people violently displaced, a country divided. Partition: a metaphor for irreparable loss. (Menon and Bhasin, Preface xi)

When the situation is such for everyone then one could slightly imagine what partition meant for women. Whether it is war, riot or any other form of violence women are the worst sufferers and it has been a universally acknowledged fact from historiography. Since their bodies signify more than physicality, sexuality is what they are targeted for. Women's bodies, their sexuality has always been used to gratify male lust. During the situations of war, partition or communal riot women are the worst victims. Country, community, religion, freedom – these are inextricably linked to women's lives although their roles and contributions in any emergency situation are rarely acknowledged. Many of them who have not been directly involved in the war but have suffered violence are hardly spoken of and remembered.

Women's partition narratives have addressed the need of feminist epistemology. Such history is explored from women's narratives, often known as feminist oral history. What Urvashi Butalia explores in the context of oral history in her *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from Partition of India* is important to mention. She is of the opinion that the oral narrative offers a different way of looking at history, a different perspective. For, because such narratives often flow into each other in terms of temporal time, they blur the somewhat rigid timeframes, then the events that mark the beginning and end of histories, their narratives flow above, below, through the disciplinary narratives of history. Such narratives offer a way of turning the historical lens at a somewhat different angle, and to look at what this perspective offers (Butalia, 54).

Partition has left various effects which draws a boundary line – it is almost like Lethe- the river of forgetfulness. Most of the sufferers of partition wish to forget those memories. The horrendous sight of violence, loss and the pain of being displaced from the near and dear ones is what the researchers could sense– especially those who have not directly experienced partition. The socio-political significance of partition goes far-fetched– it is more than thinking of partition only as a historical phenomenon.

Before going into the narratives of Shobha Rao's unrestored women it is quite noteworthy to mention the context of Rao's compilation of the narratives. Following the author's note in 1947, with the decline of British empire two new sovereign geographical lands (in the form of country) were formed- India and Pakistan. Along with the account of other sources Rao's research on the history of partition shows that "transfer of population between India and Pakistan is considered the largest peacetime migration in all of human history" (Rao, 8). She mentions at the Author's Note that officially, around 50,000 Muslim women in India and 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan were abducted. It is the worst part in the lives of those women who got the opportunity to return to their families since their family members were not ready to take them back with the reason of impurity. The social stigma forbade them to accept women of 'abducted' status. In 1949 India legislated the return of those abducted persons through the Restoration and Recovery Act. Although such women were later identified

as ‘recovered women’ but Rao addressed them as ‘restored women’ since the restoration of a human being in his/her original state is almost impossible and one could easily trace the inescapable mental trauma of an individual who is recovered.

Veena Das attempts to underline the need to frame and pass Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act, 1949. (Das, 78). The process of decolonization along with the creation of the nation state was accompanied by tremendous amount of collective violence. The reports reveal that 2,00,000 human beings lost their lives and 1,00,000 women were abducted and raped during partition. This Act was not aimed at bringing back normalcy to the situation of death and violence, it had added significance. According to Das (1995), it became an issue of national honour. On 3rd September, 1947, the inter-dominion agreement was signed and in 1949 the law was passed. The Bill was debated in the Legislative Assembly, especially to set out the terms of the recovery.

It is in this context one could remember Ismat Chughtai’s words on how women could think of “their own country”. In her words:

Our own country? Of what feather is that bird? And tell me, good people, where does one find it? The place one is born in, that soil which has nurtured us, if that is not our country, can an abode of a few days hope to be it? And then, who knows, we could be pushed out of there, too, and told to find a new home, a new country. I’m at the end of my life. One last flutter and there’ll be no more quarreling about countries. And then, all this uprooting and resettling doesn’t even amuse any more. Time was, the Mughals left their country and came to create a new one here. Now you want to pick up and start again. Is it a country or an uncomfortable shoe? If it pinches, exchange it for another? (Chughtai, *Roots*, 15)

Shobha Rao hails from Kanpur, India and later she migrated and became an American novelist. Being a part of the culture of India she has observed the atrocities of women from close quarters. Such experiences were penned down by Shobha in the form of a novel *Girls Burn Brighter* and her another work *An Unrestored Woman* contains a collection of the narratives of those women whom she addressed as “restored”, not “recovered”. Her writings explore atrocities on women and also their feelings of being recovered and restored. Regarding the publication of her debut novel, she has shared her feeling with her readers that she grew up observing the lives of women around her. Such women had poor education, poor health – above all, their lives were very devalued. The vulnerability of women has found various dimensions in her writing. She has seen the exploitation and oppression of those disenfranchised women from close quarters and that had more than an inspirational effect on her. That is why she deals with women’s issues, their yet to be told stories.

Being the winner of the Catherine Anne Porter Prize in Fiction Rao’s work concentrates on women’s oppression at various levels. *An Unrestored Woman* was published in 2016; containing the narratives of those women who shared their experiences of loss and gain in the context of partition. Neela, the protagonist of Rao’s short story “An Unrestored Woman” from the collection of the same name bears the memories of partition and her life experiences a drastic change. From her version one finds that the Muslims have burnt a train full of Hindus and among them her husband Babu was there. He was last seen at Wagah and “the train had been ambushed a few miles outside of Wagah by a horde of Muslim men” (Rao, 12).

Fifteen years old Neela became a widow and what her mother-in-law did after listening to her son's death is cruel and harsh. Rao explains the gesture which was blunt, nearly cruel, but she also mentions that her mother-in-law managed to wipe the kumkum from Neela's forehead. The crimson powder drifted down and a few specs landed in Neela's cup. They floated on the surface like tiny red islands on a dirty sea.

Such spectacle is quite common in the context of partition. Thousands of men were butchered, women were raped and mutilated and the concentration camps were full of those who became destitute bearing the consequences of partition. The "thin gold mangal sutra" bearing the sign of Neela's married status was soon taken away from her, reminding her of the loss of her husband's death; a common plight of many of those women who were victims of partition in several ways. Her hair was cut off as a sign of a widow and the best way to get rid of a life, since she is left without her husband, is to commit suicide. Her mother-in-law's offering her a concoction to get rid of life did not meet the negative consequences and her future life began in a bus, some four hours after it had set off from Attari reaching to a destination holding the handwritten sign posted on the gate "CAMP FOR REFUGEES AND UNRESTORED WOMEN. District 15, East Punjab" (Rao, 16).

Neela's meeting with Renu, another restored widow on the same camp created a little digression in their grief worn lives. They met; ate, drank and slept together and experienced some special kind of intimacy which took them beyond their grief-stricken lives. Both of them were involved in a relationship which had its own newness, thrills, prohibitions- the same sex relationships were not that common to know of during that time although they did not find anything unusual about it.

Life has its own meanings in the way it had offered to Neela. Her husband was alive, came back to her in the concentration camp and took her to their home. The very concept of being recovered could not offer her the same situation back as she began her life. Her husband returned to her but she lost Renu. She experienced a mixed feeling which may have restored her but not recovered. This story catches Neela at the quintessential moment of her life- the realm of looking and the realm of thinking- one happy and one sad. The pain of bearing the scar of riots, the memory of concentration camp and above all the change of life is what Rao intends to trace through Neela's narrative.

Renu, the protagonist of the story "The Merchant's Mistress" was nineteen when she left the refugee camp and travelled for Ahmedabad in the winter of 1949. She, along with eight hundred widows residing at the camp for two years could find no meaning of life since there was no future in the camp. The government of India took initiatives to rehabilitate them and arranging vocational training programmes to teach various skills. Renu's husband Gopichand was killed by a Muslim mob two years ago and she could remember the scene that a particular day on the evening she watched the mob torch their hut, slaughter their goats, and decimate their three meagre acres of wheat. She had run and jumped into the stream, hidden as it was by a slight ravine, and watched as the figures of the men danced in the flames...her mouth filled with dust ...her eyes lifted over the crest and that was when she saw him. In the firelight. His head tilted back, a gleam of a knife against his throat, then a gesture that was unmistakable. And in that moment Renu understood one last thing: that nothing she had imagined of her life,

of her destiny would ever come to pass. Not one thing remained. Her world had been shattered since she lost her husband and she had not anything else to think of.

Leaving the camp with a meagre amount of money, a shawl and a chappal Renu's next destination was unknown- it was like preparing one's journey from an unknown territory to another more uncertain a destination. The trauma of bearing the pieces of nation, the pain of losing the husband, the shock of being displaced from her own place to the concentration camp are some of the bits and pieces of her torn self. She would have married someone while leaving the camp, there were options for that, but to her a husband is not worth of a shawl and twenty rupees, that is how she replied Mrs. Kaur. She has been displaced once and life has now offered her so many locations to go. She had certain alternatives- she could go to Bhopal, via Jhansi, she could travel to Mathura, and then on to Varanasi, or she could go west, through Phulera and ending in Ahmedabad. Renu stood under the timetable of train departures. She breathed, hugging the sweater and shawl close to her body and she could not decide whether to go to the south or west.

Renu's journey from the concentration camp to the memsahib's quarter at Ahmedabad was a shift from the world of the destitute to a location which added digressions in her life. Renu was hired by the diamond merchant's wife, the memsahib, Savitri and Renu got her new identity. She was at the memsahib's service during the daytime while in the night she served catering to the physical needs of Savitri – within a month she became the memsahib's lover. This continued for two years and in the third year Renu had a new identity- she served as the mistress of the merchant- satisfying his male lust. Her bald head for being a widow did not hamper her love making. She was in her own ways pretty and that is what mostly mattered to Savitri and her husband- both of them had physical attachments with Renu. Queering the desire has its own meaning.

Renu's final shift from the diamond merchant's quarter to Durban had multiple layers of experience which could possibly add to the idea of displacement although it was her own choice to leave their place to search for something new. She had to displace herself for a new territory which would bring new experiences for her. She left the opium affected merchant and her disguise as a man to board the ship to Durban contains a series of new experiences. Her arrival at a new geographical location far different from where she lived till now can be seen as part of her displacement but it was her choice. She wanted to give her life a new meaning- a meaning which she has learnt to dream of after her initial displacement to the concentration camp.

“Blindfold” is the narrative of Bandra, a wife turned brothel owner for being displaced after her husband's death. He had the business of gur (jaggery) but he gambled and had a premature death. Her marriage at the age of twelve with a thirty-nine years old man was her first move. Left with a “mountain of debt and three young children” (Rao, 78) it was the best possible alternative for Bandra to start a brothel. It was into the outskirts of Peshawar, outside the walled city, it was a collection of six mud huts surrounding a central courtyard.

Bandra had to disconnect her bond with home for her profession. She became a professional brothel owner. Bandra's down payment to Abdul Shahid for his daughter Zubeida (Layla) was a part of flourishing her trade. During the time of partition, even if the country was starving for peace, men was starving for female bodies too and the supply of those bodies were

never low. Zubeida understood the market demand and the way she displaced the girls from their homes to the brothel was something more than trauma for them. Zubeida's plight is one such example. Bandra forced her when she showed reluctance to come with her. Bandra even grabbed her by the hair, and dragged her in the waiting donkey cart. Zubeida screamed and screamed and a few women and small children came to the door but no one helped her.

Bandra's displacement to Peshwar had multiple layers. She would have reared her children up in the brothel but that would bring new problems for them. They should not see their mother being involved in such a profession. Her daughter was with her grandmother in Nowshera and the two boys were in a British school in Rawalpindi. Her sons denied to identify her as their mother and she was considered as a "fog, a mist" by her mother-in-law. Her displacement from children created a vacuum but she had to think of providing them a better future than their father.

The girls in her trade were of different backgrounds. Bandra bought Zubaida from her father, whereas Bandra found Gulshan as a girl who is soiled and covered in lice in a hovel in Wazir Bagh, her father had beat her every day and there had been so little food in the family that when Bandra had given her her first meal in the brothel of dry roti and a bit of dal, Gulshan had fallen to her knees and wept. Bandra was not doing any charity, she was expanding her business and her narrative is built around the circumstances which forced her to take this alternative.

It is the story of Bandra. It is also the story of Zubaida, Gulshan and others. Each girl had a different colour of curtain which would identify their rooms- Gulshan's was red, Siddiqua's blue and Zubaida's would be green. Each of their turns come and go, they got pregnant, aborted the child, bleed profusely, felt nauseated, screamed in pain when the customers loved them too much. Layla managed to escape, Gulshan died of profuse bleeding and Bandra was beaten by Layla while she left playing a trick. It was Layla's attempt to teach Bandra a lesson so that girls would not be displaced from their places and thrown into this job. Bandra's business deteriorated, she had to reduce her rates and her last days went on in a state of eccentricity, loss, she did not even have her food. The trauma of being sold, beaten, battered and most importantly gaining a new identity- a prostitute and their painful ending is what Rao has attempted to show in the background of partition

While one attempts to find out the number of abducted women from both Hindu and Muslim communities and their recovery, it is important to follow what *Borders and Boundaries* offers us. According to Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon's research-

In the aftermath of Partition the governments of India and Pakistan were swamped with complaints by relatives of "missing" women seeking to recover them either through government, military or voluntary effort. Recognizing the enormity of the problem the two governments entered into an Inter-Dominion agreement in 1947 to recover as many women as speedily as possible, from each country and restore them to their families. This agreement was followed by the passing of ordinances in both countries to cover the years up to December 1949 and in December of that year, the Indian Parliament legislated an act to facilitate the recovery operation in India. (Menon and Bhasin, 294)

The pain of losing one's identity, her body, her near and dear ones and finally revealing that pain in front of the readers is what the unnamed narrator of "The Lost Ribbon" thought of

and she did that finally. The border line between India and Pakistan has the recurring effect in her life, as she narrates forward and backward. Her name is lost in the borders, she has given birth to a daughter who is born out of rape. She is narrating her story to her daughter Noora. She was brought to Pakistan by the man who took pity on her by forcing himself on her body. She could feel the pain of flesh, blood, mucus, membrane – she could distinguish the nature of pain in her own ways. The scar left on her body and mind is fresh even after she has passed forty years of her life. Her memory of living in the not very big town, just outside of Calcutta had left in her multiple experiences. She remembered her school days, the ribbon which she lost, about the prettiest girl in the class and then the horrible memory of her future life. Her abduction and its after effects had the most painful effects on her. To her it was a ‘funny’ experience- she forgot the way she felt pain for the first time, the excruciating pain at the age of fourteen, the man pushing up her lehenga, smothering her face with his free hand, stuffing his fingers into her mouth to muffle her screams. One could try to imagine the trauma she had faced out of that first encounter with a stranger.

Her “new and awful weight”, a sign of the man’s brutal assault nauseated her being. Her reminiscences bear the trauma throughout the story. She was with the man- somewhere in Pakistan- for almost two years. She used to sit in that darkened hut, watched the pattern of the sunlight as it slithered from one end of the room to the other, and waited. In the beginning she was sure, someone would come to rescue her as we find in the stories of damsel in distress situation. Saviours come to rescue the damsels but nobody came to rescue her. Her very dream of someone setting her free was a never-to-be-fulfilled one. The days crept by: he’d force himself on her every night, he’d sleep, she lied awake and it is very much the situation of a living corpse. He would violate her every night and he’d go away in the morning. He would return again in the evening to repeat the same process. Her female body was loaded with his lust which she could not resist. It would be fatal for her to resist.

The unhealing scars are manifestations of this. The hope of being restored some day and then the female body brutally crushed each and every day – this was the plight of many women who were abducted. Leela could not understand the equation- she, an Indian, abducted to Pakistan, giving birth to the daughter out of rape and her daughter Noora, a Muslim only because she is born in Pakistan and could not leave for India while her mother was restored. The readers find the climax with Noora, being killed by her mother because she would not live with her and it is a period of forty years which she spends remembering all these painful memories. This is how borders and boundaries split human beings.

“Kavitha and Mustafa” begins with a train stopping “between the stations twenty miles from the Indian border, on the Pakistani side” (Rao, 171). It is the story of the passengers being robbed by men from Pakistan, it is the story of women aggrieved for the loss of their jewel and other valuable things, it reveals their anxiety for the fear of death, it is also the story of Kavitha and Mustafa’s joint venture to save the passengers and their belongings from the people who robbed them. Two individuals belonging to two different communities and age groups had the same goal- to save everyone in the train. Both of them jumped together from the train to find alternative to confront those who robbed. The end of the story leaves Kavitha and Mustafa together; they did not manage to go back to their destinations, borders and boundaries of land had put them together. This is Kavitha’s journey from the domain of recovery to a location

which is unknown to her but she makes it her choice to accept it. Such diversified conclusions are part and parcels of their lives.

Thus, Shobha Rao's description of the unrestored women's journey from one particular land to the other, their sense of displacement and trauma, the borders and boundaries drawn on their lives could take the feminist oral history one step ahead and it would explore various other narratives which would invite new critical debates on the whole issue of unrestored woman.

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