

THE AGONY AND MISERY OF DISPLACEMENT AND UPROOTING IN RITU MENON AND KAMLA BHASIN'S BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES: WOMEN IN INDIA'S PARTITION

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ABSTRACT

During the communal violence of India's partition, the assault on a woman's body was perceived as an attack on the honour of the community to which she belonged. Throughout the communal frenzy of India's Partition, the act of molestation of women was committed as if it were a weapon in humiliating the rival community. The brutal act of abduction of women and young girls of the opposite community and their forced conversion was treated as an attainment of high order. When the passion of violence dominated the sanity of conflicting men of two communities, women of the rival community became the worst victims. Women's mutilation, cutting off their breasts, and parading the forcefully naked women and young girls down the streets were such acts of insanity committed by those who were once friends and closely related neighbours. The brutality and barbarity meted out to thousands of women during the partition upheaval in 1947 was unprecedented. Thus an attempt has been put to unveil the reality of this anguish and misery of displacement and uprooting in Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition.

Keywords: Violence, Assault, Abduction, Sanity Brutality.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India stands as one of humanity's most devastating and defining moments, characterized by an unprecedented mass exodus. In this forced migration, countless individuals were uprooted from their cherished homes, embarking on a quest for a new place to call home, even when true refuge seemed elusive. Amidst this arduous journey, many, including children, youth, and the elderly, succumbed to exhaustion, illness, or disease. The cataclysmic events of the Partition also saw women and young girls become targets of communal frenzy, subjected to brutal abuse by marauding mobs who viewed their abductions, rapes, mutilations, and amputations as triumphs for their own community and defeats for their rivals. Dishonouring women from the opposing community was seen as a source of pride for the warring factions, sparing not even the most vulnerable, including children and frail elderly men, from the horrors inflicted by the deranged rioters. In *Borders and Boundaries*, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin wrote:

By the time the exodus was finally over, about eight to ten million people had crossed over from Punjab and Bengal—the largest peace-time mass migration in history— and about 500,000–1,000,000 had perished. The exchange, at least as far as Punjab was concerned, was as nearly equal as can be imagined: the total non-Muslim population of Punjab in 1941 was 4,357,477, the total Muslim population, 4,286,755. (p.35)

In a matter of moments, the serene and idyllic existence that the people had cherished was violently disrupted, plunging them into a maelstrom of chaos and upheaval. The act of leaving one's home is, in its essence, a traumatic experience. Being forcibly uprooted from a place with deep ancestral roots and being thrust into displacement inflicts profound anguish upon the hearts and minds of those affected.

Echoes of Suffering and the Lasting Trauma of Partition:

The cataclysmic events that unfolded during the period of India's partition were marked by a brutal wave of violence, including widespread killings, acts of sexual brutality, the abduction of young girls and women, and coercive religious conversions. These atrocities left an indelible scar on the psyche of the victims, compelling them to embark on their journey to new destinations burdened with hearts that were both agonized and tormented. The pain and suffering endured by those who bore witness to and survived these horrors would haunt them for generations to come, serving as a grim reminder of the turmoil that engulfed their lives during

this harrowing chapter in history. In *Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Urvashi Butalia asserts: "Thousands of families were divided, homes were destroyed...villages abandoned." (p.3) In *Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacies of India's Partition*, Hajari asserts:

Gangs of killers set whole villages aflame, hacking to death men and children and the aged while carrying off young women to be raped ... Partition's brutalities were worse: pregnant women had their breasts cut off and babies hacked out of their bellies; infants were found literally roasted on spits...Special refugee trains, filled to bursting when they set out, suffered repeated ambushes long the way. All too often they crossed the border in funeral silence, blood seeping from under their carriage doors. (Hajari xvii)

The trauma inflicted upon young girls and women during the tumultuous period of Partition had far-reaching and devastating consequences. The experience of being subjected to dishonour and the burden of societal disgrace inflicted profound anguish upon them, reaching deep into the very core of their being. The agony they endured extended beyond the physical and psychological realms, for they also faced the harsh judgement and ostracization of their own communities and society at large. This social rejection compounded their suffering, as they were shunned and marginalized, their voices silenced and their dignity trampled upon. The enduring stigma of their experiences weighed heavily upon them, casting a long shadow that left scars not only on their individual psyches but also on the fabric of the society that failed to protect and support them in their hour of need. In *The Geography of Scars and History of Pain*, Vanashree Tripathy writes: "... The awful profligacy, the ugliness, sordidness and deceit converge into an agony ... that transcend physical and rational levels and expose us to secret logic of human desire and depravity— (133) In *Borders and Boundaries*, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin record the interview of Taran, a man who survived the Partition riots, represents the agony and suffering of millions of people: "... where is my country? ...my country is where I was born ... Country is where you feel at home, where you are accepted, where you know the smell of the land, the culture, where you can breathe freely, think freely ...if I cannot call a home my own, if my home is not mine, how can a country by mine? (248)

The Agony and Misery of Displacement and Uprooting:

The individuals who managed to endure the unfathomable brutality and savagery of communal riots found themselves plunged into a state of profound trauma. They were forcibly torn away from their places of birth, wrenched apart from their loved ones and dearest friends. The actions of the boundary commission, in partitioning India into two distinct nations, namely India and Pakistan, did more than just redraw political borders; it cleaved the very heart of two communities—Hindus and Sikhs on one side, and Muslims on the other.

The gradual disintegration of these once-interwoven communities led to a chasm so wide and deep that it seemed insurmountable. The scars left by this division were not solely territorial; they extended into the very souls of those who had once lived side by side in harmony, now thrust into a starkly divided landscape where trust was shattered, and the bonds of fraternity torn asunder. The repercussions of this profound societal rift would echo through generations, leaving an enduring legacy of separation and division. The agony of the displaced can be felt very intrinsically in Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's interview of Somavanti, published in *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. She said: "But I have no country now. This is not ours, that is no more ours ... Now there is no country. Earlier we had a home, a country, because we belonged there. Now we belong nowhere ... All that has gone, finished." (220) Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin write:

For the vast majority, "country" was something they had always thought of as the place where they were born and where they would like to die. Now, suddenly, their place of birth was horribly at odds with nationality; had nothing to do with it, in fact. And the place now called country, they felt little attachment to. Quite unexpectedly, and certainly unwillingly, they were violently uprooted and relocated in places and among communities they could not identify with, people they thought of as strangers. (229)

Freedom of India from the shackles of British slavery was expected to be a moment of rapture and joy, but it brought terrifying outbreak of sectarian violence and displacement of millions of people—some were fortunate enough to make it, while hundreds of others never made it. Gangs of killers set the whole villages on fire. Rape of women was used as a weapon by the mob. Slogans like "Pakistan Zindabad" were engraved on the bodies of women. According to Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin: "Amputating her breasts at once desexualizes a woman

and negates her as wife and mother; no longer a nurturer (if she survives, that is) she remains a permanently inauspicious figure, almost as undesirable as a barren woman.” (44) Exposing the patriarchal mentality against women, B. Pandey aptly asserted: “... the rape of a woman is akin to the rape of the community to which she belongs.” (105) Humiliation of women was taken as the sadistic pleasure by the perpetrators. A large number of women on both sides were subjected to stripping and nude processions after being abducted by the mob of the opposite community. Some of them were raped publicly and brutally set fire to in the public. Illustrating the agony of the raped women, Chinkin stated: “The social stigma associated with rape renders a raped woman unmarriageable, deprived of respect in society and traumatised for the rest of her life. In some cases women become unacceptable even to their own families” (4–5)

The most pathetic and heart rending aspect of the brutality occurred when a large number of women were poisoned, strangled or burnt to death, forced to be drowned in the wells or shot to death at the hands of their own family members for the sake of preserving their honour to avoid being ‘dishonoured’. It is said that they preferred committing suicide. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin write:

Virsa Singh claimed that 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 round, 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 kept shooting and shooting. “They kept bringing them forward I kept shooting. There was shooting all around. At least 50 or 60 women I shot—my wife, my mother, daughter ...” (49)

Protecting woman’s honour i.e. her chastity, was protecting the honour of the family. If woman’s honour is lost, entire family’s honour is lost. Woman’s body was considered as the repository of man’s honour. According to Pandey: “The rape of a woman is akin to the rape of the community to which she belongs.” (105) Sarkar asserts: “Same patriarchal order that designates the female body as the symbol of lineage and community purity, would designate the entire collectivity as impure and polluted, once the woman is raped by an outsider.” (2875) To avert sexual assault and molestation of women, male members strangled or poisoned the women of their families to save them and the family from being ‘dishonoured.’ Some women committed suicide, willingly or forcefully, by jumping into the wells.

Partition aftermath affected Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims with equal measure but it were the women who had to bear the burn more than men. In the period of wide spread insanity, thousands of women were abducted and kept as permanent hostages, concubines or forcefully married in the other religion. Speaking about the pathetic conditions of some recovered women, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin narrated: “They were mostly young. Even the widows were young and most of those who were picked up were unmarried. Muslims who abducted them married them, others perhaps just kept them ... Some women from good families had gone into the hands of bad Muslims.”(177) Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin write:

Sometimes when the women got together to tell their stories, their crying and wailing were almost unbearable. They would wear red dupattas and sit down and wail in different voices ... from Multan, from Muzaffarnagar, Dera Ismail Khan, the Frontier. They cried so bitterly we never knew whether we would be able to sleep in peace. Listening to them cry, I learnt to forget my troubles ... (147)

II. CONCLUSION

The orgy of violence not only took a heavy toll of life but also caused millions of people to suffer the agony of displacement, destitution and dislocation. The trauma and turmoil experienced and endured by the women was unexpected. The way, women were targeted by the communal mob, was horrible. The women were badly suffered the consequences of the communal holocaust. Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition examine and explores the pain and sufferings of the women who were brutally victimized during the Partition violence. The wounds of Partition have deeper implications in the psyches of women who survived the holocaust, but to bear the agonizing memories of their past.

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