



ATROCITIES FACED BY WOMEN DURING PARTITION

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to bring out the plight of women and the atrocities faced by women during the partition of India. It focuses on the women's side of the story, that is marked by brutality. The partition was an aftermath of colonization and women were victimized during partition. They received no reverence during and after partition. They were exploited, humiliated and sexually assaulted by men. They were also raped and abducted. They were uncertain about their future. They had no identity of their own. Partition made women realize that they were not more than non-living objects that could be possessed, looted, transferred and thrown as trash.

Keywords

Partition, Suffering of women, Rape, Abduction, Acid attack, Humiliation of women, Hope, Exploitation of women

Introduction

India got independence on 15th August 1947 but was divided into two nations India and Pakistan. They became free countries but the burden of partition was carried by both the nations. In those days women were dependent on men hence it was much more of a burden for the women of both the sides.

Women and girls were the primary targets during partition. Abduction, rape, killing etc. were rampant. They were killed by their own relatives because they were considered as objects of honour that would be lost if they fell in the hands of the enemies, hence they had to be preserved from the enemies. When they were caught or abducted by the enemies, they were killed or they themselves committed suicide to preserve their honour and that of their families. In the patriarchal society females were considered as someone's property. Masculinity and virility were shown in dishonouring the women of the opposite community to honour one's own community. In many cases women were forced to start a new life with strange people in alien circumstances and going back to their past community to meet their people and maintain the ties was a second trauma for them. The women's voice was subdued and alienated. This shows the dominant masculine ideology prevalent during those times.

Each and every society generally respects women because they raise the next generation. This reverence for women was lost during partition. During the communal riots in India, before and during the 1947 partition, one community's power over the other could not be shown completely unless the women of the community were overtaken and reduced to objects of abuse. A woman's individuality was erased; their identities as mother was prioritized and they were treated as objects. Women were branded as cattle, with political slogans, such as "*Pakistan Zindabad*" or "*Jai Hind*"-written on their bodies. These were testimonies to the fact that a woman's body served as trophies of war. Partition and its aftermath took a huge toll on women. The following categories bring out the atrocities women underwent during that period.

Disrespect of Women

During partition women were treated as objects. The victimization and disrespect of women, the sensuality of women's bodies has been openly and boldly described. It has been highlighted by Malgonkar, Sidhwa etc. in their works as shown below:

In the novel 'Ice candy man' Lenny, the narrator is a witness to the varied women victimization at the time of partition. This novel is a saga of female suppression and marginalization and projects the plight and disrespect of women in the patriarchal society. It expresses how men establish their masculine power and fulfil their desires by brutally assaulting women. It also depicts how women endure the pain and humiliation enacted upon them.

Malgonkar in his novel 'A Bend in the Ganges' says that the people were completely transformed into communal fighters. The women were earlier treated as goddess, but during the time of partition men changed into devils. Men of all communities were involved in the business of selling and buying girls.

“For every Hindu that had to die, five will die because of the way the doctrine of non- violence has caught on. More women will be raped, abducted, children slaughtered, because their men will have been made incapable of standing up for themselves.”(Malgonkar, p.247)

Exploitation of Women

Women were exploited by men of both the sides during partition. Rival communities targeted women to humiliate them and took actions against women that included rape, abduction and forcible conversions. In East Punjab, local police and the Indian military frequently engaged in the abduction and distribution of Muslim women besides the Sikh jathas and refugees from the West Punjab.

'The Ice Candy Man' or Cracking India written by Bapsi Sidhwa depicts the experience of women in Lahore, during and after partition. In this novel, Sikh crowds tortured Muslims in PirPindo; Muslim women were gang raped. Women are likely to be the prime victims during communal violence; their own bodies becoming their enemies. Sidhwa depicts women's pathetic

situation. In this novel it was decided that all girls and women of Pir Pindo village would gather in Chaudhary's house and pour kerosene oil to burn themselves alive but nothing worked.

In 'A Bend in the Ganges' Shafi wanted to take revenge on Debi by capturing his sister as he had taken his beloved, Mumtaz. He frankly told Tekchand about his intention:

“Your son took away my girl. You know what I did to her? I threw acid on her face – disfigured her for life. But that’s not enough for me. I have to get a girl in exchange.”(Malgonkar,p.320)

In 'Train to Pakistan' the incidents ultimately revolved round the two main male characters; Juggat Singh and magistrate Hukum Chand. They both were corrupt people who had a strong lust for women and who always searched for an opportunity. Juggat Singh loved a Muslim girl Nooran, the daughter of a weaver Imam Baksh. He could not resist himself from staying away that night and went to her place. He was in deep love with that Muslim girl and he frequently visited her place. At that time romance and communal frenzy went hand in hand. The love affair of the village rouge was the matter of talk for all people. He showed his love to Nooran violently. He thought that he could also control her like the whole village.

“She could not struggle against Juggat Singh’s brute force. She did not particularly want toshe pushed Juggat Singh away. He lay beside her.”(Singh, p.15)

The women psyche is completely reflected in the novel. The women were always raped, mutilated and killed. The atrocities against women were gruesome. Almost at the same time Hukum Chand, the Divisional Commissioner, who had arrived earlier was busy with a teenage prostitute, Haseena. The lust of these two people increased with the rapidity of time.

Chaman Nahal in his novel 'Azadi' poignantly touches the subject of women victims. Women were the worst victims. They were the hardest hit. The description of Sunayana, her grandeur, her untouched sophistication and the description of the way in which she is dragged and ill treated by Capt. Rahmat Ullan Khan is heart rendering. It was not only Hindus who were ill treated, their counterparts in India were no less insulted. Seeing the pitiable and helpless condition of Muslim women in India, Lala Kanshi Ram stopped hating Muslims. In each hurt

Muslim girl, he saw his own daughter Madhu whom he had lost in Pakistan in the violence erupted by the partition-

“We all are equally guilty...Each of those girls in that procession at Amritsar was someone’s Madhu.”(Nahal, p.300)

Humiliation of women

Women were subjected to maximum humiliation and torture. Their agony can be judged by the fact that a number of women jumped into wells to save their honour. Aside from the sheer horror of sexual violation, some rape survivors had to wear physically signs of their shame. The rapists frequently mutilated and disfigured the girls skin with phrases like “ Pakistan Zindabad”, “Jai Hind” etc.

Men humiliated women by insulting them. They were raped and beaten. After partition, men from the other side lost respect for women who did not belong to their clan. They did not hesitate to molest, rape or abuse them to take revenge on other men as seen in the novel ‘A bend in the Ganges’. The incident of throwing acid on the face of the women was really pitiable. The protestors thought that that was the best method to humiliate people by insulting their women. The partition of the sub-continent not only divided the people but also raised demons in them.

“Someone threw acid at her face- an electric bulb filled with sulphuric acid. That is the standard weapon of the Hindu –Muslims riots, don’t you know? That is what has happened to the face of India- the mutilation of a race conflict.”(Malgonkar, p.245)

Women of all ages were victimised, tortured and raped. Some even were stripped naked and paraded down streets to intensify their trauma and humiliation. Chaman Nahal shows in his novel ‘Azadi’ how women were humiliated by raping and beating them and considering them as objects to humiliate men as well.

“The procession arrived. There were forty women, marching two abreast. Their ages varied from sixteen to thirty, although, to add to the grotesqueness of the display, there were two women, marching right at the end of the column, who must have been over sixty. They were..... Their

eyes shed no tears.... the bruises on their bodies showed they had been beaten and manhandled. The procession moved through the bazaar and along with the procession moved a river of obscenities, foul abuses, crude personal gestures..... As soon as the women came near, that section of crowd became hysterical. 'Rape them'. 'Put it inside of them'. 'The filthy Hindu bitches'. 'The kafir women'. Some said even worse things."(Nahal,pp.296-297)

Insecurity and Rape

Rape was the worst form of suffering for women during partition. The increasing incidents of rape and molestation reflected the psyche to abuse other community's honour and self respect. Rape was used to kill the 'other' morally. Women were much unfortunate to conceal 'their selves'. They were searched out and their beauties were devastated.

As we can see in the novel of Khushwant Singh ' Train to Pakistan', during partition a new bride was raped and molested brutally by the mob.

"She had been married four days ago and both her arms were covered with red lacquer bangles and the henna on her palms was still a deep vermilion. The mob made love to her. She did not have to take off her bangles. They were all smashed as she lay on the road being taken away by one man and another and another."(Singh, pp.202-203)

In the novel Azadi the writer Chaman Nahal is concerned with showing how the partition of India in 1947 destroyed the existing harmony and morality. He displays the loss of property, a network of more and less stable relationships and condition of raped and killed women.

"Alone Muslim dragged a woman away and kept her for his own exclusive use. The rest were subjected to mass rape at times in public places and in the presence of large gatherings. The rape was followed by other atrocities, chopping of breasts and even death. Many of pregnant women had their womb torn open. The survivors were retained for repeated rapes and humiliations."(Nahal,p.293)

It is well known how male protection for women was necessary to preserve the community's honour. This was effected by controlling women's sexuality, but that protection was not there during partition. Innocent women stood bewildered by the hard and serious reality of Partition. Their parents astoundingly witnessed the helpless faces of their daughters, sisters and wives. Most of the women did not understand: what Partition was? Why it happened? Why their parents were dragging them into such a situation?

In 'Azadi' the writer shows the pathetic condition of Sunanda while Arun could not save her from being raped.

"He heard Sunanda again.

'Let go off me, you brute'.

It seemed someone's hand was on her mouth, for her words come out in muffled gasps..... She was lying on the ground on an improvised bed of hay, in the far corner. Her head was away from Arun and he saw her legs. Between her legs and on the top of her , was lying a man...

She was still weeping softly and tamely. Her breath was choked with convulsion."(Nahal,pp.306-307)

In 'Ice Candy Man' Ayah was surrounded by many admirers, Hindus and Muslims. Among her many admirers was the ice candy man who couldn't save her from being raped. He kept Ayah but renamed her Mumtaz after her abduction. He kept her in the brothel after marrying her.

"Affected atleast by Grandmother's stony silence, Ice-Candy Man lowers his eyes. His voice divested to oratory, he says, ' I am her slave, Bajjee. I worship her. She can come to no harm with me'.

'No harm?' God mother asks in a deceptively cool voice and arching her back like a scorpion its tail. She closes in for the kill.

'You permitted her to be raped by butchers, dunks and goondas and say she has come to no harm?'

‘Is that why you had lifted her off- let hundred of eyes probe her so that you could marry her?’ ...’ You have permitted your wife to be disgraced! Destroyed her modesty! Lived off her women-hood?

‘I s-saved her’, he stammers. They would have killed her.... I married her”.(Sidhwa,pp.248-249)

Abduction of Women

Abduction of women had become much prevalent in the turmoil of 1947. Even ordinary men did not lag behind to get their share. The increasing incidents of abductions and attacks on women during the 1946-47, undoubtedly, reflected the attempts to expose the most protected aspects of ‘other’s’ honour and self-identity. It may seem a truism to say this, but it bears remembering that at least half of the millions who were dislocated, killed or uprooted were women. Women become ‘plunderer’s paradise’ as it is clear from the following dialogue of the two characters Bhola and Sardana in ‘Train to Pakistan’:

“Bholeya, I hear a lot of women are being abducted and sold cheap. You could find a wife for yourself.

Why Sardara, if you can find a Mussalmani without paying for her, am I impotent that I should have to buy an abducted girl”, replied Bhola”.(Singh p.85)

In ‘Ice Candy man’ Lenny’s Ayah was one of the abducted woman. She was kidnapped by Ice Candy man and the mob. She was forced to prostitution. Ice Candy man successfully striped Ayah of her identity as a woman and as a Hindu. He kept her in the kotha even after marrying her. Hamida- the new ayah of Lenny also suffered the same psychological and emotional trauma. She was kidnapped by the Sikhs and discarded by her family.

Uncertain Future

The decision to alleviate the sufferings of womenfolk, who had suffered the most during the partition of Punjab was indifferently acted upon. Most of those women who were abducted were

also later abandoned by their families. A women's rape meant dishonour to her kin. Her presence was a reminder of her shame.

The female refugees took shelter in their relative's houses, some relatives allowed-but-some shut their doors ruthlessly, in fact, hundreds and thousands of female refugees reluctantly wished to stay in the refugee camps. The recovery operation raised the hopes of many a woman for their re-union with their families. But they were not sure whether they would be united with their families or their families would reject them. In Bapsi Sidhwa's work "Ice Candy Man" the illusion of women to meet their family can be seen.

"Where have the radiance and animation gone? Can the soul be extracted from a living body? Her vacant eyes are bigger than ever. Wide opened with what they have seen and felt; wide colder...."

But the illusion is dispelled the moment she opens her eyes not timorously like a bride but frenziedly strictly and says: ' I want to go to my family'. Her voice is harsh, guff, as if someone has mutilated her vocal cords.

'I will not live with him'. Again that coarse. Rasping whisper.

'What if your family won't take you back?'

'Whether they want me or not, I will go', She says".(Sidhwa, pp.261-262)

In the novel 'Sunlight on a Broken Column' the writer Atia Hussian presents one possible representation of Muslim women. Although she does not directly engage in political discussion, she is constantly confronted with it, because the men of her family actively participate in politics. In a sense it can be said that partition and the independence of the country enabled the female protagonist to oppose her traditional family. She became a modern woman at the same time when India broke free from colonialism and entered modernity.

The life of Ayah after the marriage is pathetic. She is forced to become Ice candy man's bride. She is kept at a 'kotha' after her marriage. But as soon as she gets an opportunity, she seizes her freedom. She is firm and decisive and does not want to live with a person whom she does not love. She tells her Godmother:

“I want to go to my family I will not live with him”.
(Sidhwa, p.261)

Conclusion

In the years after Independence almost nothing was known or told about women's fate during partition. During the decolonisation process it was observed that women during partition were either victims or refugees workers. Development of feminine traits upholding feminine consciousness with female nature and carrying out the responsibilities associated with the domestic affairs were considered the only aim for women. Patriarchal society stereotypes ignored women as physically weak to venture into the world outside the four walls of their houses and too deficient to make important decisions.

Partition definitely affected women psychologically and traumatized a whole generation. Women either had to struggle with the direct consequences of partition like riots, abduction and rapes or they were indirectly influenced by the huge political and social change. While some lives were destroyed, some women could grow from the challenge. Thus after studying the novels, it is revealed that women were brutalized and sexually maltreated and this trauma lingered on for a long time.

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