

RESEARCH ARTICLE



SILENCE, SURVIVAL AND RECUPERATION: READING WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN PARTITION LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The survivor-victims of gendered violence at the time of the Partition of India were asked to remain silent about their horrific experiences of sexual exploitation. The stronger force of patriarchy stifled their voices and denied them any agency to speak up and to narrate their traumatic past. In this paper, I seek to analyse the role of narrativization as a means of recuperating and remaking a self in the aftermath of the traumatic experience. Sexual violence reduces the victims to the status of objects. Narration of the traumatic memory is seen as an effective means to return to personhood. I analyse the various obstacles encountered by the women who survived Partition violence in the effective articulation of their past. Also, I look at the ways in which the rehabilitation of women within the family structures was premised on certain regimes of the body, most important of which was their sexuality. I argue that even though the women were rehabilitated but they were never fully 'accepted'. Their past identity as well as their position in the family was entirely altered subsequent to their restoration. Hence, the process of survival became a never-ending process of coping up with the horrendous past and domesticating their shattered world. I look at two short stories: *Khol Do (Open It)* by Saadat Hasan Manto and *Lajwanti* by Rajinder Singh Bedi to support my argument.

Keywords: Sexual Violence, Trauma, Survival, Witnessing, Rehabilitation, Recuperation

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The 1947 partition of British India into two independent nations (India and Pakistan) was accompanied by enactments of violence unspeakable in their brutality and horror, leading Mushirul Hasan to label it a "bloody vivisection" (xii). Amongst the several atrocities at the time of partition were those committed specifically against women. Several women were raped, murdered, abducted and forced into marriage. They became the targets of horrific violence and their bodies became the sites over which victory was sought.

Gendered violence has mostly been read as metonymic of the violation of the land. Women's bodies hold immense significance in an all-male dominated society where the responsibility for the protection of their chastity and honour rests on the shoulders of men. Their sexuality becomes highly problematic, particularly at the time of disorder and war because their roles as biological reproducers and transmitters of culture make them highly vulnerable to acts of sexual exploitation by men of the 'other' community. In the context of the

Partition of India, the unprecedented levels of sexual exploitation against women on both sides of the border testify their role as “objects in male constructions of their own honour” (Das 43). As Ruth Seifert puts it, the female body is “a symbolic representation of the body politic” (62) and rape of women is “the symbolic rape of the body of [the] community” (64). Robbing them of their honour becomes the means through which male power is destabilized, community’s identity is threatened and the nation’s pride is defeated. Susan Brownmiller states, “In one act of aggression, the collective spirit of women and of the nation is broken, leaving a reminder long after the troops depart. And if she survives the assault, what does the victim of wartime rape become to her people? Evidence of the enemy’s bestiality. Symbol of the nation’s defeat. A pariah. Damaged property. A pawn in the subtle wars of international propaganda.” The honour of the community, thus lay in protecting ‘its’ women, or in allowing them to be ‘self-martyred’ so that their honour is unsullied.

The official version of nation’s history has obliterated the experiences of a multitude of women who were victims of the gruesome acts of violence at the time of Partition. The state’s version has marginalized all those alternative histories which pose a challenge to the nation’s collective identity. Not only were their voices suppressed in the historical accounts, but also within their own families and communities which insisted that they remain mum about their past traumatic experiences. Their silence regarding the question of their sexual purity/ impurity became an important condition for them to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into their families. In a patriarchal set-up, where utmost importance is given to the sexual purity of women, the experiences that could threaten the stability and erode the honour of the community as well as of the nation were effectively sidelined and ignored.

Most trauma discourses emphasize the importance of turning a traumatic memory into a narrative memory in order to enable the survivors to make sense of their present and their future. Speaking up in the aftermath of trauma helps the survivors to recuperate. How are then we to read the silences of several women who were silenced by

the dominant voice of patriarchy which did not let them find an outlet for the articulation of their traumatic experiences? Is recuperation ever possible for them? This paper attempts to address these important questions by analyzing two stories – *Khol Do* (Open It) originally written in Urdu by Saadat Hasan Manto and *Lajwanti* originally written in Hindi by Rajinder Singh Bedi. Both the stories depict the plight of women who were abducted and were later recovered by the state sponsored recovery operation. With the help of these two stories, I examine how, for women, a place within their families is contingent on their being sexually pure. Through these narratives, I also try to explore the possibilities for survival in the aftermath of the violent experience and the difficulties that these women faced in domesticating their shattered world.

Susan J. Brison points out the role that narrativization of traumatic memories plays in the remaking of the self in the aftermath of the brutal traumatic experience. According to her, trauma narratives, which she terms as “speech acts of memory” (55), empower survivors to gain control over the troublesome memories of their heinous past and to grapple effectively with their shattered present. The experiences we have had and are yet to have in the future form an integral part of an ongoing narrative which is the accumulation of our remembered past, lived present and the anticipated future. After a traumatic experience, our connections with memories of our earlier life and our ability to envision a future are completely lost. Pierre Janet points out, “Resolving a traumatic memory is about turning a traumatic memory into a narrative memory, that is, turning the memory that is disjointed and incoherent into one in which the memory of the traumatic event is integrated into the life story” (quoted in *Memory, War and Trauma* 132). If the victim is able to provide a coherent shape and temporal order to the disjointed episodes of traumatic experience in her life-story, there is a possibility for her recuperation.

However, there are two major obstacles that a survivor-victim faces on the way to recuperation. First is the inability of the victim to form a coherent narrative of the past experiences due to the loss of words and the inability to

articulate. Usually after a traumatic incident, the victim finds it difficult to regain one's voice, one's subjectivity and is reduced to the status of a mere object. O'Kearney and Parrott point out that the traumatic memories are dominated by sensual, perceptual and emotional components which are difficult to integrate into the conscious narrative because they lack verbal components (quoted in *Memory, War and Trauma* 119). As a result, the person loses a sense of the self and is not able to form connections with the memories of the earlier life and with the present. Second is the difficulty to find a listener who is willing to lend a sympathetic ear to the experiences that the survivor has endured. The survivors are often asked to maintain a silence about their past and start afresh in the present. Brison makes a note of psychoanalyst Dori Laub's words, according to whom, "Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener." Laub observes that the process of remembering and narrating involves a "re-externalizing" of the traumatic event(s) that "can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside" (62). It is the dependence of the self on others, which is denied in most cases, that explains why it is so difficult for the victims to recover even several years after the painful incident. It is within the framework of these arguments that I situate the silences of Sakina and Lajwanti, the women-survivors in the two stories and examine the options available to them in the aftermath of the horrific experience of sexual exploitation.

I begin with Manto's story *Khol Do* (Open It). Set during the riots of 1947, Manto's story is a rape narrative that testifies to the ways in which the horrendous act of sexual exploitation may make it impossible for the survivor-victim to regain one's voice and one's subjectivity. At the beginning of the story, an old Muslim man, Sirajuddin is found lying on the bare ground in a refugee camp on the Pakistani side of the border. On regaining his consciousness, he recalls the riots that took the life of his wife while they were travelling along with their daughter Sakina from one side of Punjab to the other. He looks all around for his daughter, but she is nowhere to be found. He recalls how her dupatta

(a long scarf) had fallen on the ground and he had stopped to pick it up. This act of picking up his daughter's dupatta testifies the life-threatening importance accorded to women's 'honour' in a patriarchal society. While trying to recollect the entire episode, he suddenly finds a piece of cloth in his pocket and recognizes it to be Sakina's dupatta but she herself is missing. Unable to locate her, he seeks the help of eight "young men armed with guns" deployed as "volunteers" by the state to recover abducted women from the other side of the border.

The narrative then shifts to the scene in which we find Sakina with these young men on a lorry. On noticing that she had no dupatta to cover her bosom with, one of the men gives her his jacket so that she could cover herself. The act that her father had failed to complete is now completed by her new protectors. In the camp Sirajuddin gets the news that a young woman has been found unconscious by the railway tracks and has been brought to the camp hospital. He identifies the corpse like body of the woman to be that of his daughter by the mole on her right cheek.

"I am her father," he stammered. The doctor looked at the prostrate body and felt for the pulse. Then he said to the old man: "Open the window."

The young woman on the stretcher moved slightly. Her hands groped for the cord which kept her salwar tied around her waist. With painful slowness, she unfastened it, pulled the garment down and opened her thighs.

"She is alive. My daughter is alive," Sirajuddin shouted with joy.

The doctor broke into a cold sweat. (Manto, Trans. Alok Bhalla, Source: Web)

Sakina's inability to speak and her response to the doctor's instruction testify to the trauma that she has endured. It is only through her gesture that the readers are given an insight into what all she might have gone through when she was separated from her father. The narrative refuses to state anything in explicit terms, thereby maintaining a silence and marginalizing her brutal experience. Brison states, "Traumatic memories are intrusive,

triggered by things reminiscent of the traumatic event and carrying a strong, somewhat overwhelming, emotional charge" (60). Sakina's past is triggered by the doctor's instruction to Sirajuddin to open the window. She is so conditioned to the words "Open It" that on hearing these words from the doctor, she is immediately transported to the time and the scene of her violation. Her traumatic memory of the past haunts even her present. As Dominick LaCapra notes, "In post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinctions between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realize one is living in the here and now with future possibilities" (699). The horrific experience has not only numbed her, but has also left her without any inclination and stimulation to actively participate in the task of reconstructing her life's narrative. The traumatic memory has been so much etched in her body that she fails to construct her painful experience into a meaningful narrative. The "normality" of her language has been completely destroyed (Das 76).

Sirajuddin's expression of joy and happiness on noticing a slight movement in the girl's body is in direct contradiction with the usual reactions of the male members on finding their "impure" wives and daughters alive. While several fathers and husbands refused to accept and reabsorb women whose honour had been sullied in the violence that unleashed in the aftermath of Partition, Sirajuddin refuses to act in a 'traditional' manner. He "wills his daughter to live even as parts of her body can do nothing else but proclaim her brutal violation" (Das 77). This points to a failure on the part of Sirajuddin to comprehend the sexual degradation that his daughter has gone through. He fails to understand the significance of Sakina's gesture that points to something gory and brutal that she has experienced. Hence, he fails to be the witness that his daughter needs.

However, it is through the doctor that Sakina is able to "re-externalize" the traumatic event and articulate the traumatic past to another person outside herself. Although being an external and detached viewer, the doctor does not fail to be affected by his proximity to her trauma. He acts as a

witness to Sakina's traumatic past. It is not her language that conveys her traumatic experience to the alienated doctor, but her very gesture that makes it impossible for him to remain detached.

Through a single gesture, Manto shifts the focus of the story from Sirajuddin's trauma to Sakina's traumatic past and to the doctor's trauma. Despite the acknowledgement of her pain by the doctor, she still cannot be reabsorbed into her family and community for it is her very silence that will never enable her to cope up with her traumatic past. Her brutal experiences will always remain inscribed in her body and will serve as reminders to her defilement. Her inability to regain her voice and narrate the brutal experience that she underwent negates all the possibilities for her recuperation. She has been reduced to the status of an object. Her subjectivity has been rendered useless and worthless. The concluding sequence of the story drives home the realization that in a patriarchal set-up, there is no place for a woman who has been 'polluted'.

The next story that I shall examine is Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti*. *Lajwanti* is set in a riot-devastated town in post-Partition East Punjab, around 1948-49. The narrative revolves around the lives of a young married couple, Sunderlal and Lajwanti, and the ways in which Partition permanently alters the 'normality' of their heterosexual relationship. In the very beginning, Bedi points out that in the aftermath of partition violence rehabilitation committees are set up in every nook and corner of Punjab. People enthusiastically associate themselves with various committees that are formed to rehabilitate the dispossessed, the displaced and the refugees. However, the committee formed for the rehabilitation of abducted women is left "neglected" (21) by everyone. The narrative points out the unwillingness of the people to take back those women who had been 'polluted' by members of the 'other' community. He makes a mention of the staunch opposition raised by the priests of Narain Baba's temple as well as the orthodox people who lived in the vicinity. The slogan of this committee is also revealing: "Honour them. Give them a place in your hearts" (21). It clearly points out that even those women who had been accepted in the family

and the community could not secure a place in the hearts of their loved ones. Their relationship with their family members and their position within the family structure had been completely altered.

Sunderlal is elected the Secretary of the committee because people feel that he would work with a lot of zeal and enthusiasm as his own wife has been abducted. However, his task of persuading people to accept recovered women is not without obstacles. While some families are shown to be influenced by his powerful sloganeering leading them to accept 'violated' women, others still persist in refusing to recognize the returning women: "Why didn't they die? Why didn't they take poison to preserve their virtue and honour? Why didn't they jump into a well? Cowards, clinging to life! Thousands of women in the past killed themselves to save their chastity!..." (23). These lines underscore the action expected of women in the midst of communal violence. By pointing out the fact that a large number of women were forced into death to avoid sexual violence against them, to preserve their chastity and to protect individual, family and community 'honour', Bedi throws light on the place that women's sexuality occupies in an all-male, patriarchal arrangement of gender relations. In marked contrast to many "husbands, parents, brothers sisters [who] refused to recognize" (23) the Hindu and Sikh women reclaimed from West Pakistan, Sunderlal speaks the language of tolerance against the conservative rhetoric of others and pledges that if he is given another chance, he would enshrine Lajwanti in his heart.

"If I ever find her again, if I ever again do... .I shall honour her and give her a place in my heart... .I shall tell everyone that the women who were abducted are innocent. They are victims of the brutality and the rapacity of the rioters... A society that refuses to accept them back, that does not rehabilitate them... .is a rotten, foul society, which should be destroyed..." (23).

Like several fictions on abducted women, *Lajwanti* also draws upon the story of Sita from the Indian epic, the Ramayana. On one occasion when Narain Babu gives the example of Ram rejecting Sita, Sunderlal bursts out and presents a different interpretation of the mythology. He declares Sita to

be innocent and puts the entire blame on Ravan. However, here Bedi operates with a certain kind of irony. Soon after his declaration, Sunderlal is given the news about the recovery of Lajwanti. The façade built up by Sunderlal falls down and even proclamations to honour her and enshrine her fail to bridge the huge gap that her abduction had erected between the two of them. This irony is asserted in his stunned reaction when he observes that contrary to his imagination of an "abducted" woman, Lajwanti looked "healthier than before. Her complexion seemed clearer and her eyes brighter, and she had put on weight" (30). The narrative makes it clear that for Sunderlal, the experience of confronting Lajwanti had been profoundly "disturbing" (30). Several questions were raised in his mind but he withheld them because he had avowed that he would not chastise her. Despite his doubts, Sunderlal "did not flinch from doing his duty" (30).

After the return of Lajwanti, the focus of the narrative shifts from Sunderlal's contribution to the rehabilitation programme to Lajwanti's trauma. Her brief absence has completely changed the dynamics of their relationship. We are made aware that Sunderlal used to abuse her wife physically but subsequent to her abduction, he defies her, addressing her as "devi", a pristine goddess even though what his wife actually wants is a little love from him. His wife becomes an object of his worship: "He enshrined Lajo like a golden idol in the temple of his heart and guarded her like a jealous devotee" (30-31). Even though his repentance is genuine but what kind of rehabilitation does he offer to Lajwanti? She can only be rehabilitated as a goddess and not as a human being who has been a victim of sexual abuse. Her traumatic past and her experience with the 'other' community need to be completely erased in order to ensure that she is reabsorbed into her family.

Lajwanti is overjoyed at her husband's changed behaviour towards her and desires to pour out all that had happened to her. She searches in her husband an empathetic listener who can help her come to terms with the tormenting experience that she has had. However, Sunderlal fails to acknowledge her pain. He fails to be the listener that Lajwanti requires. He only asks her three

questions about her life before her return: "Who was he?", "Did he treat you well?" and "He didn't beat you, did he?" (31). When she tries to share her story with him telling him that her abductor treated her well, and yet she feared him, Sunderlal only says, "Let us forget the past! You didn't do anything sinful, did you?" (31). However, as it was seen in the case of Sakina, a traumatic past can never be prevented from intruding into the present. Lajwanti has to bury her traumatic past within herself in order to be accommodated in the house of Sunderlal. Their cohabitation is contingent on her silence and Sunderlal's deification of her as a pristine, untouchable goddess. Towards the end the narrative makes it clear that Lajwanti can never be the person that she was prior to her abduction: "Lajwanti looks at herself in a mirror and realizes that she would never be Lajo again. She had returned home, but she had lost everything" (32).

In spite of his praiseworthy reformist intentions, Sunderlal is unable to come to terms with his wife's cohabitation with another man and therefore, he provides no space for Lajwanti to speak out. His refusal to be an audience strong enough and willing to hear her traumatic narrative thwarts her effort to unburden herself and her "sorrow remained locked up in her breast" (31). He denies her the therapeutic space that would have helped her overcome her past experience and recuperate. The therapeutic role that remembering and narrating play is denied in this case.

In both the stories we find instances of life-threatening importance placed on the sexual purity of women. A place in the home is contingent on them being chaste and unpolluted. Both the stories also testify to the ways in which men fail to act as understanding listeners to the traumatic experiences of the survivor-victims. As a result, these women are offered no scope for recuperation. In Manto's story, Sakina is wholeheartedly accepted by her father, but her silence becomes the signifier of her exploitation. Despite finding a sympathetic witness in the doctor, Sakina's inability to speak up and to integrate her traumatic experience into the ongoing life-story makes it impossible for her to be rehabilitated. Lajwanti is rehabilitated but not accepted. The loss of her identity as 'Lajo' alters the normalcy of the relationship with her husband. She

wishes to tell her husband all that she has experienced in the past but her husband fails to be the listener that she expects him to be. In both the stories, the survivors are denied the moral space that could have helped them to heal. A patriarchal society does not offer them the scope to transcend the memories of their traumatic past and healing and survival become an ongoing process that never seems to end.

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