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PARTITION OR AN ARMED CONFLICT AN INSTANCE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN
SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S "WHAT THE BODY REMEMBERS"

TANIA BANSAL

Ph.D. Research Scholar
Central University of Punjab, Bathinda



TANIA BANSAL

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ABSTRACT

The paper is another attempt in the direction of efforts of Partition theorists like Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, Sudesh Vaid, Dr. Guneeta Bhalla. It delves into how 'agency' of women becomes the most vulnerable population of a country at the time of communal riots. Armed conflicts are junctures in history which have women suffer the most and some writers in present times are concerned about the muted histories of the marginalised where women and children largely are not talked of or relegated to the background in the academic history books. Women at the time of Partition either suffered at the hands of patriarchy i.e. men of their family who, to an extent in turn were forced to act in the manner, at the behest of the state apparatuses with the ongoing proceedings in regards with the nation – state or they took their own lives so as to save the 'honour' of their community and themselves.

Keywords: women, violence, armed conflict

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When we try to speak of events of which we do not know the meaning, we must lose ourselves in the silence that lies in the gap between words and the world.

Amitav Ghosh – *The Shadow Lines*

The 'silences' that still scream in individual and collective memories of victims of communal violence and communal division of the territory are finding a vent with increasing efforts being made by contemporary writers. The growing awareness of the lack of research carried out in this area of study has hastened efforts with writers undertaking research to revoke history and talk of less exhausted areas. As Navtej Bharati, the poet declares, "Punjab and Punjabis have not explored Partition, they have maintained a mysterious silence. Perhaps they are making use of silence to deal with the complexities

related with Partition."² It is owing to this lack of exhaustive study of certain complexities that this area yet remains viable for a research to be undertaken by research scholars in the present and in times ahead. As Prabhjot Parmar, the well known academician on Partition literature asserts, "There are numerous stories that need telling and layers that need careful unpeeling to let the profound implications of Partition days come out into the open and generate discussions of issues lying dormant under a shroud of silence."²

Some questions, some desires, some moments can never retreat into the "lightless crevices of memory"³, or of time. No matter how far the current of history drags one headlong, there is bound to be a resting place. After countless years of

painstakingly absorbing struggle, have women found that Utopian world, yet need to be seen.

The present period of history is one of the Walls. Concrete, bureaucratic, surveillance, security, racist walls. Everywhere the walls separate . . . They exist too in the richest metropolises of the world . . .⁴

Not just the present but the past too was. The walls of racism, religion, communism, that we have tried to nourish in the past have led ever more to consolidation of hatred and prejudices in the present making us slaves of our own cocoons. And hatred on lines of religion proves and has proven in the past as the worst of walls giving impetus to the dangerous communal violence driving entente on religious interests thus sanctioning genocidal violence in the chapters to be written in history. India's blood-tainted Partition which resulted due to religious communal hatred – between Hindus and Muslims – is one such example.

As an event of colossal consequences, Partition still haunts the memories of people and retains its importance even today. It led people to redefine, re-construct and re-habilitate themselves forcing them against their will to resettle on a foreign land. Talk of partition and images of bloodshed, loot, rape, abduction, slitting of necks of women by family male members in order to save their honour, instances of vandalism surface making a person twitch nervously. Even for a person who did not witness it mere reading about partition makes one emotionally sensible to the atrocities leaving traces psychically far from being mended. The paper would look at how women become the most sensitive lot during an armed conflict, how women overturn from being victims to activists if at all they do through a reading of *What the Body Remembers* by Shauna Singh Baldwin.

The case of Bilki Bano who was gang-raped during Godhra riots and was left for dead with her 14 dead family members in 2002 which came to the surface in the year 2006 as amongst many other such cases and of the physiotherapist in Delhi in 2012 doesn't take much for one to be reminded of the past – the communal violence taken out on women during Partition. Amidst the rising fury and frustration over increasing violence upon women

amongst all sections of society and not just women, voices of certain political and religious leaders were heard suggesting women to return to 'tradition'. And the sound of the word 'tradition' forces one to question – how is a woman placed in (Indian) tradition? Is a so called traditional woman not an object of male gaze? Can 'tradition' protect woman against objectification? Rather one doesn't need to hark back to a long lived past of the tradition of the myths but a recent past of Partition seems appropriate to gauge the position and status of women in Indian society which I propose to try looking at through the paper.

I am a woman
I want to raise my voice
Because communalism affects me
In every communal riot
My sisters are raped
My children are killed
My men are targeted
My world is destroyed
And then
I am left to pick up the pieces
To make a new life
It matters little if I am a Muslim, Hindu or Sikh
And yet, I cannot help my sisters
For fear that I may be killed or
That they may be harmed.⁵

Women have been victims of violence during partition which resulted into women writers talking of gendered violence during Partition in their narratives on a large scale in present times. The novel *What the Body Remembers* is about a polygamous marriage of two women Roop and Satya to an Oxford returned Sardarji with a backdrop of Partition - 1947. Roop is married to Sardarji to continue his lineage as Satya, the first wife is not able to bear children. Novel about the two women who share the love of their husband is not just presented as a novel representative of hatred between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs but centres on women and their condition during the armed conflict i.e. the Partition. Any instance of violence upon a woman in present times reminds of the cataclysmic moment of violence Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in the past where women

suffered most. Recovering women, who suffered and were victims of the holocaust has been the motive of women writers and feminists who with their writings try and give recognition to the marginalised – women and the children thus, becoming part of the movement of liberation of women. Talking of atrocities upon women like rape, abduction, cutting of a breast, slitting of throats of women for the honour of the family Baldwin centres on history which men authored to ensure that it is encultured through books by the posterity and yet is struck out from history texts. In words of Sangeeta Ray:

The raped female body encompasses the sexual economy of desire that is denied in the mythologization of the purity of one's own ethnic, religious, and national gendered subject. The inevitability of rape leaves woman with the "choice" of committing suicide so that she can be accommodated within the narrative of the nation as a legitimate and pure – albeit dead – citizen. Those who survive rape are refused entry into the domestic space of the new narrative.⁶

Apart from rape another instance of violence conducted upon women during partition is recollected in the last chapter, where Bahchan Singh living as a refugee in Delhi recalls his last stint of saving the honour of the family by striking his daughter-in-law Kusum's head off her shoulder. The instance clearly recounts the violence embodied upon women during Partition emblematic of the gendered abuse upon women.

I raised my kirpan high above her head. Vaheguru did not stop it; it came down. Her lips still moved, as mine did, murmuring, 'Vaheguru, Vaheguru,' as her head rolled from my stroke."... "I felt the warm splatter of her wet blood here, through my kurta. I didn't know one woman could have so much blood inside her. Blood arced, spouted, gushed everywhere. I opened the wedding trunks and pulled out clothes as fast as I could, my tears mingling with it."⁷

For Baldwin, Roop the (s)hero questions herself if it was required of a woman to die like that? News like

"the seeds of that foreign religion were being planted in Sikh women's wombs (586) were making rounds and thereby, Bahchan Singh considered it his "duty" to kill Kusum as he considered her his "responsibility". This incident recollects another mentioned by Urvashi Butalia

In one of these villages, Thoa Khalsa, some 90 women threw themselves into a well in order to preserve the 'sanctity' and 'purity' of their religion, as otherwise they would have had to face conversion.... the tales of women's sacrifice occupy an important place...it is they who are seen to have upheld, by offering themselves up for death, and more particularly 'heroic' death, the 'honour' of the community.⁸

Urvashi Butalia in her seminal book further asserts thus posing a question do women not have the right to live as free as men?

If they come to the masjid everyone's namaz is ruined. If they come to listen to the sermon, everyone's attention is distracted. If they go to the dargah they will get pushed around by men, and if they participate in a qawwali mehfil the Sufi's attention will be on worldly things rather than on God⁹...

This paper as just another attempt in the lineage of writers like Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Dr. Guneeta Bhalla tries to look at how at how one time friends turned into die-hard enemies thus making women the butt of their anger and hatred? Does emasculation of men of another community had to pass through rape and atrocities upon women? Enabling readers to 'empathize' with women characters the novel brings forth muted histories illuminating upon this aspect. In words of Dr. Anjali Tripathy:

Baldwin's novel shows that the possibility of radicalism and protest lies in owing up one's corporeal consciousness, the critical knowledge of one's victimhood and a sense of historicity.¹⁰

Note: The paper was read at an International Conference at Jalandhar on "Cross Cultural Nuances."

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