



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

RETRIEVING ACTIVISM: WOMEN AS AGENCY IN MUKUL KESAVAN'S *LOOKING THROUGH GLASS* AND BAPSI SIDHWA'S *CRACKING INDIA*

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ABSTRACT

The partition of India is one of the most defining moments in Indian History. Unimaginable atrocities were perpetrated on innocent people. Women were the worst victims of the communal violence. However, such violent acts have not been recorded in the statist hegemonic accounts of partition history. Though literary narratives have emerged as significant archives where one can confront the plight of common men and women, very few fictional narratives have focussed on women's activism. By addressing Mukul Kesavan's *Looking through Glass* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* this paper retrieves women's activism from such a turbulent period when women's bodies were territorialized as the chief mediums in the process of nation-formation.

Key Words: partition, women, violence, victims, agency, activism.

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INTRODUCTION:

[H]istory, like all other disciplines, is patriarchal in nature, and had thus marginalized women. (Butalia13)

The partition of India is one of the most defining moments in Indian History. Unimaginable atrocities were perpetrated on innocent people. Women were the worst victims of the communal violence. However, such violent acts have not been recorded in the statist hegemonic accounts of partition history. Though literary narratives have emerged as significant archives where one can confront the plight of common men and women, very few fictional narratives have focussed on women's activism. Women have not been granted a representational space in hegemonic nationalist historiography.

In the interface between religion and women, traditional scholarship envisions women mainly as victims. Urvashi Butalia in *Community*,

State and Gender: Some Reflections on the Partition of India shows that along with new definitions of violence, notions of women's agency also emerged. Butalia stresses the need to look into these issues. Kumkum Sangari in *Consent and Agency* says that unless the agential structures for women are understood in all their material ramifications, no meaningful intervention is possible.

By addressing Mukul Kesavan's *Looking through Glass* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* this paper attempts to explore the multiple ways in which women were engaged in resisting or establishing their own small but potential positions thus creating a space to unfold the complicated nature of agency exhibited by women.

Ammi's activism in Mukul Kesavan's *Looking through Glass*:

Ammi [Kulsum] is the most powerful character in *LTG* who remains firmly rooted in space and time, determined to resist changes. Ammi's role

in the novel destabilizes the fact that agency is visible in public acts and great personages only. Her private activism is juxtaposed with the activism of the unnamed female Congress propagandist of the public arena campaigning on the eve of the attack on Madhuban Thana.

From the *zenana* of her Lalbagh house, she runs single-handedly an Urdu women's magazine - *Khatoon* which deals with the issues of imaginary travels and adventures of women across the globe that are the invention of Ammi's imagination and not with the domestic household accounts like recipes, beauty care, household care tips etc. as a woman's magazine is supposed to deal with. In fact Ammi devotes her journal for re-inventing separate life for women outside their homes, "Till women reinvent the world, she said to me, who will let them live in it?" (LTG 18)

Another stance of Ammi's activism is her resistance and denial to shift to another place leaving her home. On a suggestion of Masroor that they should shift to Delhi so as if the country is divided they can easily cross the border to go to Pakistan, Ammi roars like a pure nationalist because to her Delhi or even Pakistan is an absurdity: She vehemently objects to Masroor's suggestion to go to Delhi:

Why should you want to wreck the only world you have for some day-after-tomorrow? You'll never get there- there's no such place (LTG 325).

And with a firm 'No' rejects Masroor's suggestion:

(...) No, I won't move to Delhi. Because your father might come back. Because your reason for going to Delhi is absurd. You want to live in the future like the rest of them. Delhi's just your time-machine... Why should you want to wreck the only world you have for some day after tomorrow? (LTG 325)

The idea of splitting the country was not acceptable to her, as a nation cannot be built on the ground of compromises. Ammi outwardly condemns the failures of nationalism and nationalist movements:

Throw the English out if you want – but why can't you leave the rest alone? Isn't it natural for people to be attached to their

lives? You I can understand; the young always want to change the world. But Gandhi and Jinnah and Nehru? Experienced old men who want to sweep their lives away and live like strangers in brand new countries. They must be mad. How do they know that the change will be for the better? That they won't yearn for things as they were before they were different? Why doesn't someone stop them? (LTG 325-26)

For Ammi, her present, the city of Lucknow and her relation to it remains the main focus of this present. She ridicules the idea of 'tomorrow', of future and poses a question, "the last time I saw your father was fifteen years ago. So did he disappear in the past?" (324) She lives in present and has faith in present only. She retorts, "future! Why do you people always talk about places that you've never been to?" (324) she interrogates and dismantles the entire time frame and notion of future when she says:

Every day that he (Intezar) doesn't come home, he disappears. Every time I look for him, he disappears. He disappeared this morning when I got up. And when he does return, it won't be in your precious future – it will be today. Just as your children will be born today. And when you die, you will die today and then die every day for the lifetimes of the people who loved you. The young never understand that they aren't given a fund of days to spend... but just one, continuous life, where everything happens in the present. (LTG 324)

On Masroor's suggestion of selling their house she says:

If I lose, I will sell the house for the highest price that this advertisement fetches and shift to you're your quarters in Delhi. But if I win... I will withdraw the advertisement and keep the house-but you will leave the army and return to Lucknow. Then we'll wait for your father together. (LTG 327)

When Masroor reprimands to do something rather than criticising Nehru, Jinnah, Ammi decides to contest in the local election and files a last-minute

nomination by making an independent political party entitled "Anjuman Bera-I-Tahaffuz-Haal" which she explains as "Society for the Defence of the Present." that focuses in its manifesto as changing nothing. By introducing her humble and simple manifesto Ammi interrogates the grand declarations of political parties as well as their motives:

For five years after the English leave,
no roads shall be renamed,
no statues removed,
no statues raised,
no republic constituted,
no Constitution written,
no coins minted,
no textbooks written,
no stamps issued,
no laws made,
no elections held,
no boundaries erased,
no frontiers drawn,
till we sort out what we want to keep,
from what they leave behind. (LTG 336)

In a communally charged atmosphere Ammi's simple proposal to defend the present seems to be sublime in comparison to the grand agenda of big political parties, but certainly is radical in its refusal of singular narrative teleologies of either community or nation. Her manifesto is a series of negatives. (Gopal Priyamvada 2009, 86).

But Ammi's activism as independent entity is not a matter of approval in public accounts. Since Ammi is Muslim so her identity can only be understood within Muslim identification codes and frames only. This is very well critiqued in the discourse, which occurs between local press and Ammi. The media people want Ammi's photo in *burka* because she is a Muslim and want to take her interview on the formulation of a separate Muslim party when already the Muslim League is representing Muslims. Ammi's direct activism can be seen in her protests when she says:

You've got Islam on the brain...The Anjuman Bara-I-Tahaffuz-I-Haal is not a Muslim party-It is a society for the Defence of the present.

But the reporter's nose kept tracking the Muslim lady." Yes,' but he went on

unstoppably, didn't she (as a Muslim) want the Muslim League to win? Didn't she want to live in the Muslim homeland, in Pakistan?

What for? she said rudely.

It will umm...be the Republic of Islam, he ventured.

But it won't be Lucknow, said Ammi (LTG 330).

Ammi's refusal of many impositions foregrounds her as a true embodiment of agency.

Speaking for themselves: Parsi Women's agency in *Cracking India*:

While most of women in *Cracking India* are victims of male oppression, violence and exploitation, they are not shown only as victims: they also exhibit distinct forms of power: Lenny, as the Parsi girl narrator, is given narrative agency, though her agency compresses and vanishes after Partition. In the same way Ayah enjoys control over the males of all religions prior to Partition. During Partition she is kidnapped by a group of men including Ice Candy Man and is forced into prostitution and afterwards Ayah's power vanishes.

However, Lenny's mother and Godmother demonstrate the strongest examples of feminine power in the text and they are offered an agency and a voice, with which they can actively participate as testimonies in the historical discourse of Partition. The text illustrates the principal values of compassion and charity through these two Parsi women.

Prior to Partition, Lenny's mother is represented as a submissive figure fulfilling her husband's every requirement and wish managing the household duties. However, Lenny's mother attains agency and emerges as a strong woman during Partition, fearlessly working as a social worker engaged in rescuing, sheltering and restoring victimized women to their families. Lenny's mother along with Electric-Aunt are seen risking their lives by smuggling the rationed petrol to help their "Hindu and Sikh friends to run away (. . .) and also for the convoys to send kidnapped women to their families across the border" (*Cracking India* 242). Partition provides an occasion to Lenny's mother to come out from her domestic sphere and thus

empowers her to act for social cause.

Lenny's mother and Godmother are shown not only to help and shelter the refugees from Pir-Pindo but also employing women like Hamida who was abducted, raped and rejected by her family. Godmother and Lenny's mother are engaged in the rehabilitation operation of 'fallen' women like Ayah and Hamida during the Partition.

Though Godmother is shown as an empowered woman from the very beginning, her agency particularly becomes evident when she liberates Ayah from the subjugation of Ice Candy Man. She emerges as a strong, authoritative and influential woman who not only berates and undermines the power and role of Ice Candy man but also blatantly rebukes and threatens him for punishment:

You have permitted your wife to be disgraced! Destroyed her modesty! Lived off her womanhood!" (CI 260).

"You would have your own mother carried off if it suited you! You are a shameless badmash! Nimakharam! Faithless! (...) You're not a man, you're a low-born, two-bit evil little mouse(...) You're the son of pigs and pimps!" (CI 260-261).

She threatens, "I can have you lashed, you know? I can have you hung upside down in the Old Fort until you rot! (...)

It's no good crying now. You'll be shown as little mercy as you showed her" (CI 261).

And in the end it is Godmother who manages to restore Ayah's speech-power back breaking her silence and accomplish her wish to return to her home to be fulfilled.

Lenny's Godmother Rodabai who " can move mountains from the paths of those she befriends"(CI 223) also arranges Ranna's education in a boarding house after he had been orphaned. Lenny refers this act as "a minor miracle (...) Getting a poor refugee child admitted to a convent school is as difficult as transposing him to a prosperous continent, and as beneficial. Not only for him, it is said, but for seven succeeding generations of the Ranna progeny" (*Cracking India* 223).

Heroic and benevolent deeds of Lenny's mother and Godmother as exhibited in the novel

Cracking India are some fragments of the humane acts performed by Parses during the turbulent days of Partition not recorded in the pages of macro narratives of partition history.

CONCLUSION

By examining the female agencies in the selected texts, the paper retrieves women's activism from such a turbulent period when women's bodies were territorialized as the chief mediums in the process of nation-formation. The selected texts on one side recaptivate women's agencies and on the other side problematize historians' accounts, which either elide women's histories or represent them as victims or within the patriarchal framework.

In *Looking through Glass* Ammi's feminism and her magazine *Khattoon* is the best example of Women's activism at the time when women had not invented their world. It not only exposes the spirit of a women in 1940's fighting against the patriarchal hegemony in the terrain of politics but also foreground the suppressed possibilities of opportunities marginalized women might have secured in that era in the male-dominated sphere of politics. *Cracking India* records the sincere efforts of Parsis during partition and recovery operations thus dismantles the popular notion that Parsis had remained indifferent to the sufferings of the victimized Hindus and Muslims.

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