

History is a Woman's Body: A Study of Some Partition Narratives

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The tragic case of Nirbhaya in December 2012 in Delhi, which ultimately led to her death, has aroused a fury across all sectors of society in India, and not just amongst women. Amongst that anger and frustration at the rising violence against women, many religious leaders suggest that women should go back to 'tradition.' The exhortation to go back to tradition forces a woman like me to ponder over the following questions: "Can adherence to 'tradition' help to curb the cases of violence against woman?" "What is the place and position of women in (Indian) tradition itself?" I would not seek to find the answers in the mythical tradition of the long past. Rather the experience of partition in a comparatively recent past speaks eloquently of the status of women in Indian society and the nationalist tradition.

Violence was perpetrated on female body in a major way during the partition of India into India and Pakistan and bloody conflicts between communal forces were played out on it. It is the reason why gendered violence figures prominently in partition narratives by women whether fictional or biographical. Urvashi Butalia in her critical memoir on partition titled *The Other Side of Silence* metaphorically titles one of its chapters as "History is a Woman's Body," showing how history was played out on women's bodies during

the partition and how women became passive, suffering subjects of history without being able to claim recognition of their suffering and even 'martyrdom.' From these and other personal as well as fictional accounts of partition it becomes apparent that woman's body became the site of communal violence that became a sordid side-show of the nations coming into being with much fanfare. But still worse, it remained unacknowledged by nationalist history. The painful corporeal truths of women rooted in suffering, displacement and rupture, which could have put the entire story of the independence of the two nations in entirely different complexion, were occluded from the narrations of the nation. Hence, perhaps, the cultural importance of novel like Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999), aside from its inherent literary merit.

The suffering of women at the partition is rooted in national culture and gendered nationalism. Indian culture is deeply informed with the myths that motherhood is best realized when dedicated to the cause of the nation as *veeraprasabini* (begetter of heroes); wifehood is accomplished when used as the source of strength of the heroic husband, or sacrificed in honour of the deceased husband as *sati*; womanhood is best idealized as *shakti* and

birangona in the fields of battles to vindicate, paradoxically, the patriarchal causes and such ideals are thought to be patriarchal woman's inevitable destiny and happiness can come only through it. Indeed, all these myths enunciated in the *Ramayanas*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* have congealed into the Indian cultural imagination the icon of nation as motherland. In this iconic framework of imagination women's bodies have been represented as maps of the country. The spatial connection drawn between the female body and the territorial landmass symbolizes woman as the nation. A whole tradition of nationalist iconography of woman-as-mother as a metaphor and metonymy of the bountiful land in literature and visual popular culture—even including Katherine Mayo's notorious *Mother India* (1927) with its negative portrayal of India as the wretched mother of the hungry millions—that came into being during the late 19th and early 20th centuries strengthened the thematic and iconic links between mother and the nation. The "Mother India" trope in Indian nationalist rhetoric has called upon men to martial duty towards the motherland and any secessionist movement has been termed matricidal betrayal. Urvashi Butalia offers a striking example from the rhetoric of one newspaper: "One issue of the *Organizer* (August 14, 1947) [Pakistan's Independence Day] had a front page illustration of Mother India, the map of the country, with a woman lying on it, one limb cut off and severed with Nehru holding the bloody knife" (*Other Side of Silence* 186). Such sentiments are echoed in Bapsi Sidhwa's partition novel *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), alternatively titled *Cracking India*, where the child protagonist Lenny expresses her feelings after witnessing the widespread atrocity in Lahore by forcing her cousin to help her rip a doll's female body apart. Although it was a doll only but the large lifelike female doll in Sidhwa's novel strengthens its

connection with real body which in turn is associated with geographical division of the land. When Baldwin re-uses this trope of India as ravaged body subject to male violence she writes, "Seventy-three days to cut a land in three, West Pakistan, India, and East Pakistan, like cutting arms from a body" (439), which seems to idealize motherhood as a prescriptive norm of femininity for female citizens.

Partition violence positioned women as objects of possession and vehicles of communication of belligerence and reprisal between opposed groups of men. In *What the Body Remembers*, as "Papaji [Roop's father] thinks that for good-good women, death should be preferable to dishonour" (521), he kills his daughter-in-law Kusum so that her body would not be violated by men of the other community. Unaware of his father's action, when Jeevan returns to his father's home amidst the riots of partition and discovers the body of his wife Kusum that has been dismembered, rearranged and placed beneath a white sheet, he thinks: "... Why were her legs not bloody? To cut a woman apart without first raping—a waste, surely. Rape is one man's message to another: 'I took your pawn. Your move . . .'" (511). He understands the remembering or the arrangement of limbs after ripping out the womb by the enemies as an eloquent message of war against the Sikh quom and so sensed the need for revenge. Devoid and deprived of a voice, Kusum's body becomes a medium for "one man's message to another" (511).

That's why as borders are struck to split mother India's body into India and Pakistan, and the outbreak of religious and ethnic genocide follows for mapping of bodies in their appropriate location. On both sides of the border while villages are plundered and burnt, women are mutilated

and sexually tortured, and trains of migrants crossing in opposite directions arrive full of dismembered bodies and gory sacks containing female sexual organs. Baldwin too registers an account of horror of violence on and violation of bodies trying to cross the border through Roop's witnessing the event. She talks of women losing their children's hands, children losing their parents, young girls being whisked away over men's broad shoulders, kicking and crying (495-96). She sees the ghastly "death train" (which is almost an iconic image of the partition)—each carriage of which, "like so many others before it, comes smeared with blood, windows smashed. The silence of the slaughtered rises, palpable and accusing . . ." (495). Like the train passing through Mano Majra in Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, the train witnessed by Roop shows the partition literally as an experience of dismemberment of bodies and also reveals the fragmentation of human heart at a psychological level. Roop hears of men making martyrs of women and children (497). Baldwin constructs a gendered national allegory by representing the violence on women's body mainly through Kusum's fate. What is achieved through the dismembered body of Kusum in *What the Body Remembers* is realized through a Hindu servant woman's (Ayah's) ravaged body in *Cracking India*. Sidhwa said that her aim was to show that women suffer the most from political upheavals, and that "Victories are celebrated on the bodies of women . . . when women are attacked, it is not they *per se* who are targets but the men to whom they belong" (Bhalla, *Partition Dialogues* 233).

Whether it is massive displacement, abduction, or rape, or battles that never reach the headlines, India and Pakistan participate in the gendered mapping of women's bodies as symbolic of countries' and communities' body politic. After the Partition, the passage of the

Inter-Dominion Treaty of December 6, 1947, the Central Recovery Operation, and the Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Ordinance Act No. LXV of 1949 set off a massive rescue, recovery, and rehabilitation Indo-Pakistan campaign that was enacted in often violent ways. The recovery operation lasted until 1956, "with 22,000 Muslims women recovered from India and 8,000 Hindu and Sikh women recovered from Pakistan" (Butalia, *Other Side of Silence* 163). The lives of women who were homeless or rejected have not been included in these estimates. Nor do these numbers tell the stories such as police participation with abductors to prevent the recovery of women. An interrogation of the partition, thus, shows the mutually constitutive acts of mapping bodies and borders.

Moreover, the recovery and restoration project to 'return' women to their 'own' home/countries forcibly which was a second uprooting for the women, sent them on a journey fraught with pain, guilt, shame and rejection. The oral history projects (of Butalia, Bhasin, Menon and others) demonstrate how the 'recovery' operation was framed by both India and Pakistan and how through this, women suffered a second trauma inflicted by their 'own' state, community and family. A Sutara would tell the tale of thousands of partition victim women who were unacceptable in their own families. Sutara in Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning* (1967) was violated by the enemies and suffered social rejection by her own community. During the partition, abducted by members of the 'enemy' community, yet 'recovered' by the state of which they were considered citizens, women were forced to leave behind the 'post-abduction' children with their fathers, who in many instances were the perpetrators of violence. Some killed the children as Chandini Kaur did in Shauna Singh Baldwin's short story "Family Ties" in *English Lessons* in

the hope of being accepted by the family. The treatment of women's bodies and the meanings assigned to them, both during the riots and in the recovery operations, make literal the nationalist rhetorical move of locating national definitions and national virtue in women's bodies.

Although the power-structures code and regulate the bodily life of persons, it is not always that they suffer their fate passively. Howsoever oppressive the power-structures may be, there are possibilities of resistance that the subjects offer. In this context I find Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* unique and inspiring as it examines the marginalized female body not only as a site of violence, but also as a locus of resistance and an agency for the articulation of an independent voice. Baldwin's novel shows that the possibility of radicalism and protest lies in owning up one's corporeal consciousness, the critical knowledge of one's victimhood and a sense of historicity. Baldwin's protagonists Roop and Satya realize this possibility in their respective ways.

For her part, Satya, the barren woman, inhabiting a liminal position in patriarchy, understands her precarious position of having been neglected and abandoned thus:

I am not wife, for my husband has abandoned me. I am not widow, for he still lives. I am not mother, for the son he gave me is taken away, I am not sister, for I have no brother. With no father, I am but daughter of my Bebeji. And so I am no one. (360)

Faced with this terrible fate of having no identity based on social-relations, she discovers that her own body is a prison. She begins to wonder why this body was given to her, "body that imprisons her," one that does not know how to die. **She has a "body," and yet she is "no-body"** (360) suggesting that claim to one's own

body equals claiming the self and elevates woman's status from object to subject position. She, therefore, chooses to escape the prison house of body through death. She carries out her resolve voiced early in the book, to make her death matter (unlike her father's death). Satya kills herself in protest against the patriarchal order, and her voice in the form of radical consciousness whispers to Roop the subversive meaning of self-killing and murder of women during the partition of the subcontinent that needs to be remembered in the nationalist history:

Why does a woman choose to die?

A shadow woman whispers in Roop's ear, 'Sometimes we choose to die because it is the only way to be heard and seen, little sister'. (526)

The self-killing in question is thus a patently radical act to counter all forms of honour-killing that the patriarchal society legitimated for upholding the honour of the community.

As for Roop, after witnessing the atrocities on women's body during the partition, she rebels. Roop's subjectivity, which has been stymied inside her heavily oppressed body, bursts out in rebellion, and she parades naked on the railway platform in the aftermath of the partition. Amidst mayhem and bloodbath of the partition, she wants to scream:

"See me, I am human, though I am only a woman. See me, I did what women are for. See me not as a vessel, a plaything, a fantasy, a maid servant, an ornament, but as Vaheguru made me."(498)

This is as bold and radical a gesture comparable to Dopdi's in Mahaswata Devi's eponymous story "Draupadi" when she challenges the masculinist oppression of the State power to parade her naked body that has been raped and battered before the Senanayaka in the police station. The event provided Roop with a self,

helped her to gain agency and voice. Her punning determination to remember and re-member Kusum's body becomes a source of empowerment for her. Instead of being a site a border crossing her body dares to cross the border prescribed by the patriarchal society and she explores the radical potential of body by making it a site of resistance to question the patriarchal power structure and the nation-state.

Thus, a woman writer like Baldwin takes up the tropes of mother, her corporeality and biology not in deference to the patriarchal ideology underpinning the iconization of woman as nation in the nationalist discourse, but quite ironically to question the selfsame ideology and open up its contradictions and ethical limits. The corporeality of the female body can unleash a huge amount of thematic possibilities and subversive power in the fictional writings by women writers like Baldwin. It is my contention here that remembering these women and drawing strength from them can help women empowerment and effectively solve the reiteration of the violence on countless Nirbhaya, Itishree and others. Though I am hopeful of women's emancipation and independence through resistance, a change in the attitude of man is equally the need of the hour. The past and the present time tell the same story of women's suffering and dishonour because "Men have not yet changed" (*What the Body Remembers* 538).

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