
IMAGE OF REFUGEE WOMEN IN POST- PARTITION LITERATURE

ROSHNI SHARMA

Abstract: This paper highlights the depiction of women as victims during Partition and goes beyond the set limits to illustrate how extraordinary determination and grit within women combined with an excessively strong survival instinct to tide over the disaster that they had to face for no fault of their own. The paper focuses on how women were represented as victims, survivors and peacekeepers.

Keywords: Partition, Refugee Women, Survivors, Victims

Introduction: Traditional histories and most male – authored texts canonized in the secular scripture that is academics, generally represented woman as marginal, secondary, subsidiary, or derivative figures, defined almost entirely through their affiliations to males as the mothers, wives, daughters, sisters or mistresses, but rarely the leaders of men, rarely even independent agents in their own right. Indeed, those who have claimed an autonomous independence are often represented as unnatural or masculine figures, seductive or destructive or all of these. As Maithreyi Krishnaraj points out, much of the present male bias is projected in the imaginative reconstruction of the prehistoric past. The invisibility of woman in available historiography is attributed to the fact that ‘man held power and woman appeared not to have had the power to write them [selves] in.’ With the introduction of the issue of gender into a discussion of the history and politics of the Partition, a very different kind of story has emerged – different in terms of the understanding of Partition it provides and of what it means to write history and read literature about the period. This chapter would focus on the way how literature on Partition has tried to represent the category of refugee women. The representation of refugee women as victims, survivors and peacekeepers and therefore, scripting femininity in terms of vulnerability, non-assertiveness and pacification. How at the end of a new beginning, the refugee woman were able to relocate themselves; and before that how they were victims in some instances and were also agents who survived this trauma. The chapter would focus on two important novels on Partition writing by women themselves and the way women have been represented in them. Going beyond the depiction of women as victims which they were, these novels illustrate how extraordinary determination and grit would combine with an excessively strong survival instinct to tide over the disaster that they had to face for no fault of their own. The figure of the refugee woman, as both a refugee and a woman, is a doubly marginalized figure. The figure underwent many mutations through decades, intertwined with other interests and discourses. Women as a sign of nation has never

been a stable concept, rather is always contested. Women are required to reproduce the nation physically and symbolically while men protect, defend and avenge the nation. Moreover, some women went far beyond just being the ‘sign’ in various degrees of deliberation and articulation. The aspect of nation as mother that is worth mentioning in this context is that if the nation is ‘personified as the Mother Goddess,’ then its people are not nation, but are *sons* of the Mother. In this relation, the body of the woman are then primarily imagined as mothers themselves. This was very much present during Partition and is prevalent till date. However, the framing of women in such a manner is not just confined to the Indian subcontinent. It’s true for other parts of the world which have experienced genocidal and communal violence provoked by race, religion, language and so on. Violence was inextricably linked to Partition. Women have been the subjects to all sorts of imaginable and unimaginable atrocities and violence. Killing foetuses, knifing and opening the pregnant womb, constituted the offenses against the father/husband, but these acts also signify genocide. In the India of the mid-nineties, the image of the raped and abducted women, the metaphor of the violated body of the nation, continued to be repeatedly used to generate an important element of what one might call a new political economy of violence. Such violence is directed against the minority community in particular ways: rape, leading to impregnation with the seed of the ‘superior’ or ‘pure’ race. Women were arguably the worst victims of Partition having to endure not only the destruction of their homes, displacement and violence, but also abduction, prostitution, mutilation and rape as they became a sign through which men communicated with each other. Atrocities were enacted upon the bodies of women as men of one religious group sought to dishonour the men of another faith, by proving them impotent in their ability to protect ‘their’ women. The sense of dislocation, disruptions of notions of home, difficulties of feeling in place, divided kinship and forced kinship, and being caught in the gendered political economy of property rights are common to

many women's experiences. For example, the story of Zainab, a young Muslim woman, and Buta Singh, her Sikh husband, which had wide reverberations, memorialized as it was in newspaper accounts, a memoir, and a Pakistani film called *Kartav Singh* and a Punjabi film as well entitled *Shahed-e-Mohabbat*. Zainab had been abducted during the relocation of her family from India to Pakistan. She had passed through many hands, and was eventually sold to Buta Singh, an Indian Sikh. Singh married her, and 'in time, the two grew to love each other. They had a family, two young girls'. This story and many of its kind demonstrates some of the gendered/sexual/religion based complexity of Partition. For many of these women, the official recovery meant a second uprooting. Many of them openly protested against such recovery operations. Women were important only as objects, bodies to be recovered and returned to their "owners" in the place where they 'belonged', which was determined by the state. About 750,000 figure women were raped and abducted by men of the 'other' community, and sometimes of their own, during Partition. Overall, cumulatively and from its very inauguration, the field has emphatically underscored that the Partition was a gendered phenomenon. The trauma that the refugee women went through in many cases does not even find a place in any text or in some cases it is not spoken off. As in the case of the novel, *The River Churning (Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga)*, where the author does not specify the exact nature of violence that is inflicted on the main character Sutara Dutta. So much so that even the victim seems to be unaware of the trauma that she has gone through. Such silences, the author Jyotirmoyee Devi argues, should not be resolved, accounted for, unveiled or recovered rather, be understood as women's inability to subsume their experience within the projects of patriarchal modernity that has produced them in the first place. Instead it should be treated as "loss as loss". Feminist scholarship in India that has studied Partition and other instances of communal violence, especially with respect to gender, provides ample reason to argue not only for the complicity of the community but for the active role of the community in disallowing the trauma to speak. It is also clear that silence here is gendered and subject to a gendered-censorship of what is permissible to be spoken about or when it is permissible to speak at all. Menon and Bhasin explicitly state, 'With women [. . .] the shame-fear-dishonour syndrome presents itself differently: fear at the prospect of being sexually used; the unspeakable shame of being raped; fear of death and afraid because without defenders; and the twin dishonour of violation and disaster'. While some kinds of stories could be narrated – those, for instance, of 'honourable' deaths – there was less

sanction for accounts of those women who survived. Revealingly, therefore Butalia calls her chapter on consensual killings 'Honour' while Menon and Bhasin call theirs 'Honourably Dead'. Menon and Bhasin write: How often were we told of the courage and strength of the women, who came forward to be killed, or who set an example of self-negation by taking their own lives; and again and again, we heard men say with pride, 'They preferred to die.' This has only released the men from the responsibility for their deaths it also put a closure both on the women's lives and in their speech. [. . .] The subsequent taboo on recall drove many, many women into silence and a willed amnesia regarding their violation. Sutara, in *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* is being portrayed as 'polluted' refugee women within her 'own' community/family. Here, the 'us' and 'them' shifts to human beings on two sides of gender divide from the community divide, indicating that the women's citizenship is determined on the basis of her possessing the right (inviolable) body. This brings us to the fundamental question of women's freedom/right over her body in newly independent India. However, the struggle of the refugee woman was not confined within the four walls of their homes; they came out of their homes when the situation demanded. Those who had some education set out in search for jobs in educational institutions, government and semi-government offices and private firms. Those who lacked education did not give up and rather fought the battle with much more vigour. A section of them capitalized on their training in household activities for commercial purpose by preparing varieties of pickles, papad, badi (made of various kinds of pulses) and other culinary articles. A large number of them were engaged in preparing paper packets and rolling bidis. A few among them took up a more challenging and unconventional job as hawkers. Some refugee women took up the profession of bar dancers in the hotels of Calcutta. Partition dissolved (though temporarily) strict distinctions between the private and the public. It was Rabindranath Tagore's political novel *Ghare Baire*, which sensed the crisis, in the duality of women as both signs and subjects in a political space with the entry of women in public/politics. Tagore's novel dramatizes the tension around the character of Bimala in the novel *Swaralipi*. The novel *Swaralipi* situates the gendered relationship of home and its outside/the world on a different paradigm. In the upheaval of the Partition the boundaries, the imagined lines, between the home and the world, even in bhadrakalok homes, becomes impossible to maintain, which one can point out in the case of Sita. How the silence (Sutara's trauma) takes a back seat when women comes out in the public sphere. Women, in this novel, are politically aware and

active. They work to provide labour to household for political ends: giving shelter, serving meals, providing tea and snacks to members in meetings, cleaning up afterwards, nursing the wounded comrades and other everyday activities. In the novel one encounters women political workers who already have this mobility between the home and the world. A character named Radha is a peasant woman and a Tebhaga fighter, working and travelling from village to village but staying and hiding in peasant households. Therefore, the whole idea of the division between the two spaces – home and the other world – becomes questionable. Instrumental to the presumed divide between the personal and the political is gender. It is an alignment of women with the personal and home that brings about the exclusion of women from the public-political domain. Partition thus produced enormous disjunctions with far-reaching changes. Displacements and violent uprooting caused by this event pushed millions into carving survival strategies in new surroundings.

Amidst abduction, rapes, loss of family and separation, however, these women displayed tremendous resilience and exemplary courage. They became subjects of governmental intervention, as the state saw them as not the repositories of familial and community honour but also of national honour. Thus one can say that the figure of the refugee women in the post-Partition period can be seen as a resistant, interventionist figure which claims political subjectivity. Gender dynamics in the Partition-like violence that has become recurrent in the history of postcolonial India itself is one, but clearly not the only example that proves that the old persists, taking different shapes. The history of women also testifies that the struggle to find subject hood against erasure continues. This means that while some achievements of these historical refugee women did translate generationally in some sure ways, but we still cannot begin to plot a definite progress story that ends with these women

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Roshni Sharma
Surana College, Bengaluru, Karnataka