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LOCATING GENDERED VIOLENCE IN INTIZAR HUSSAIN'S *BASTI*, RAHI MASOOM
REZA'S *ADHA GAON* AND SHIV K KUMAR'S *A RIVER WITH THREE BANKS*

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ABSTRACT

The partition of India is the most painful and traumatic episode of Indian history. Partition in general was accompanied by a huge wave of violence, but the atrocities against women were probably the most horrible ones. Though women were neither the part of the political decisions that divided the nation nor they had any role in the violence that followed partition, yet they were the worst targets of brutality inflicted by the men of other communities. The impact of the partition on women was much different and more traumatic and heartrending than men. Atrocities were enacted upon the bodies of women as men of one religious group sought to dishonour the men of another faith by declaring them impotent in their inability to protect their women. Partition was such a tragic moment of madness in Indian history in which men went mad and women shrank to symbols only; symbols of the nation or community they belonged to. This research paper offers a feminist reading of the partition by focusing on the victimization and sufferings of the women during partition as reflected and embedded in Rahi Masoom Reza's *Adha Gaon*, Intizar Hussain's *Basti* and Shiv K Kumar's *A River with Three Banks*.

Key Words: Partition, women, violence, atrocities, victimization, representation

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INTRODUCTION

Women were 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" (Das 56). Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta argue, "the easiest way to assail a community is to defile the sexual purity of its women." (Bagchi 1-14) Kabir avers that the 'wound that was then inflicted on the body of the individual was also a wound inflicted on the body collective, most obviously through the rape, mutilation and abduction of women' (Kabir "Musical Recall"). Writing about the partition experience of north India, Gyanendra Pandey uses *Beeran ki kai jaat* (what caste or nationality can a woman have?) because she belongs to someone else, and therefore to his caste, nationality and religion" (Pandey 165). However, then Pandey points out the extreme paradox and says: Yet, the evidence from 1947 seems at times to suggest almost the exact opposite: not that 'women had no religion for community or nation, but that they came for a moment to stand for nothing else' (Pandey 165).

Traditional history most often tells only political and historical events conducted by a few historical

key figures, mainly politicians and leaders, the histories of ordinary people and the consequences of those events on their lives are not included in the main historical discourse. Therefore it is not surprising that nearly most of the historical research about Partition does not have inclusion of women's experiences and stories. Therefore, it can be asserted that literary texts can be important sources of history because they provide writers with a different space to articulate subaltern's as well as women's voices.

Gerda Learner in "The Challenge of women's history" asserts that women are not given voice in patriarchal history and she emphasizes for the need to rewrite it:

Women have been left out of history not because of the evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male-centered terms. We have missed women and their activities, because we have asked questions of history which are inappropriate to women. To rectify this and to light up areas of historical darkness we must, for a time, focus on a *woman-centered* inquiry, considering the possibility of the existence of a female culture *within* the general culture shared by men and women. History must include an account of the female experience over time and should include the development of feminist consciousness as an essential aspect of women's past. This is the primary task of women's history. The central question it raises is: What would history be like if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define? (Gerda 178)

Depiction of Gendered Violence in Hussain's *Basti*:

So far as gendered perspective is considered, *Basti* marks noticeable biases. Though the novel condemns and interrogates the religion based decision of partition and brings forth the agony and mental disillusionment of those people who migrated leaving their homes to the newland, however, the protagonist Jakir represents history of partition from the lens of a patriarchal authority and thus marginalizing the roles of women within their domestic spheres like mother, servant, sister, and beloved.

However, certain incidents, silence of some characters, and hysteric behaviour of some women expose the trauma they might have undergone during the time of partition. The dialogues between two friends Dalmat and Afzal about the identity of their father as well as their rage over this issue unlayer the suppressed agony their mothers might have undergone in the past in the wake of partition violence. Though unrecorded in official histories these histories speak volumes of agonies women endured during partition days:

He's not my father!' Salamat yelled 'then whose father is he?' Afzal asked innocently.

I don't know, but I know he's not my father. I'm a bastard. He said, grinding his teeth furiously.

Is there any proof? Fellow! Before making this announcement, you should have asked your mother.

I did ask her.

Then the ignorant woman refused to give evidence, he said in a grief-stricken voice. Then he said sadly, 'our fathers are cruel and our mothers are ignorant.' Even as he spoke, he began to weep.

When Ajmal saw Salamat weeping, tears began to fall from his own eyes as well.

Fellow, why are you weeping?'

Yar! My mother is even more ignorant than Salamat's mother. When he asked her, first she slapped me, then she began to tear her hair and scream (*Basti* 60).

This piece of dialogue, though very small it is, indicate the suppressed agonies, psychological implications of partition atrocities, traumas of victimized women which they had to carry in their lives.

Gendered Violence in Reza's *Adha Gaon*:

Adha Gaon is not a gendered centric text. Women are represented within the premise of domesticity discussing, gossiping, engaged in preparations for the celebrations of marriages and especially highly engrossed in the festivity of Moharrum, preparing dresses, composing *nauhas*. They are the women shown, even in the midst of tense atmosphere of communal clashes outside, singing marriage songs inside their homes:

Look, here comes mum-in-law
Full of joy and fun
In her front's a little pond
At her back a wrestler's bum
Drinking sharbat she's got drunk
She'll be pissing chul...chul...chul... (VD 254)

Most of women of Gangauli are seen highly engaged in their everyday concerns, food, dress, settlement of suitable grooms and brides for their daughters and sons. In fact they are victims of their own hierarchies. Though much space is not given to them but they are the ones who are mostly affected by Partition. Most of them are left alone in Gangauli because their husbands have gone to Pakistan; some of them like Saddam have married again, and have children in Pakistan. Partition has wrecked their life beyond repair. Women of Gangauli are victims of a state decision: of dividing a country. The fabric of their life is fragmented into half because they are deprived of their families even in their own country. Earlier, when their husbands used to go to Calcutta and other cities in search of employment, though they cursed those cities for separating them from their husbands, they had hope of returning their husbands, but now they don't have any hope for the return of their husbands. Partition has wrecked their world fully depriving them of their husbands and making their lives difficult to meet two ends. Their Mourning at the time of Moharrum becomes a lament not only of sacrifices of Imam Hussain but also of the separation from their husbands also. Their unbearable plight and wretched conditions draw our attention to the psychological, emotional and economical ramifications of the partition.

Though Reza has not represented direct scenes of gendered violence, however, we do have some reportages of victimization of women during partition.

Safir-va who was so reluctant leaving his village because he was 'scared for Sagir Fatima's sake' (VD 265) leaves for Pakistan. The train stopped somewhere between Delhi and Amritsar. Bacchaniya and Saghir Fatima were left this side of the border. Safir-va carried the corpses of his younger children with him into Pakistan (VD 266). What happened to women during communal clashes is represented in brief:

In all directions such great cities were ablaze that Bacchaniya and Saghir Fatima fell into that fire like straw and were immediately consumed. Delhi, Lahore, Amritsar, Calcutta, Dacca, Chittagong, Saidpur, Rawalpindi, the Red Fort, the Jama Masjid, the Golden Temple, Jallian Bagh, Hall Bazaar, Urdu Bazaar, Anar Kali... Anar Kali... Now Anar Kali was named Saghir Fatima, or Rajini Kaur, or Nalini Banerjee—Anar Kali' corpse was in the fields, on the streets, in mosques and temples, and on her naked body were the marks of nails and teeth. And men carefully collected strips of blood-soaked skirts, shalwars and saris and put them away in boxes of memorabilia as keepsakes. (VD 266)

This fragment of history, though small it is, exposes the seamless pangs women underwent during communal violence in 1947.

Representation of Women in Shiv K Kumar's *A River with Three Banks*:

Shiv K. Kumar's *A River with Three* has a distinct edge over other novels. Even though deliberated from a male's pen, the novel provides a sympathetic account of gendered violence. The text represents the story of an abducted Muslim girl and her being taken straight to a brothel in Delhi. The agony and plight of Haseena, the main protagonist, represents the commodification of women's bodies during the fatal days of partition. Neither Muslims, nor Hindus, nor Sikhs but women of all these communities suffered the most during partition. Women in those communally charged days were abducted, raped, paraded naked in public streets, forced to prostitution, and put to death and were treated as a commodity to be bargained and make profits.

Haseena is abducted, her father is killed and her family migrates to Pakistan due to the partition. Though Kumar is a male writer, he has sensitively represented the experiences of women in this novel.

Hasina's identity is disclosed by a letter which is found from the pocket of the dead man, the riot victim in front of the St. John's church. Letter discloses the fact that his name is Abdul Rahim and he has come to Delhi in search of Haseena, his daughter, who was abducted from Allahabad. The letter also reveals the plight of other women:

(...) That most of the girls abducted from Allahabad, Lucknow and Patna have been brought to Delhi, where they are forced into prostitution (RWTB 10).

And the fact how women became commodities in those communally charged days:

Shall write to you tomorrow again, Insha-Allah, after meeting this shopkeeper. He has promised to put me in touch with one of the leading pimps, Suleiman Ghani. I may have to pay a heavy ransom to get Haseena out, if she's still alive (....) (RWTB 11)

The letter also reveals the fear and insecurity parents felt in those days particularly for their daughters: "Oh God: Don't let Salma stir out anywhere "(RWTB 11).

Even his wife Begam Rahim later on in the novel expresses this fear at the time of their migration:

(...) we've decided to migrate to Pakistan---and that decision is absolute, irrevocable. She paused for a moment, then resumed: I can't let Salma be whisked away next. You can't take charge of the entire family when there are abductors lurking everywhere (RWTB 169).

When Gautam conjectured up the plight of Haseena and Salma he thought: "Thank God, he didn't have a sister "(RWTB 39).

Haseena narrates the terrible feel of being an abducted girl:

Imagine a group of young abducted girls, holed up in a house, murky as a dungeon; forced into prostitution at knife-edge I don't know why I submitted myself to all that ignominy... But each time I let a customer take me, I felt as though I'd thrown a bone to a dog (RWTB 103).

Haseena's internal conflict is evident in her thought when she returns to Allahabad--

She was *now* returning to a fatherless home, with a Hindu - no, a Christian - she corrected herself. She couldn't foresee how she would be received by her family. Would she be discarded as a defiled thing, a fallen woman? Maybe her mother would have been happier, she thought, if she'd stayed back in Delhi, whatever might have been the circumstances. (RWTB 115)

But soon she gains confidence. Gautam's true love for her restores her to a new life and confidence:

In fact, I've become quite fearless. I'm no longer frightened of the panda, or Pannalal. What will be, will be. There comes a moment in one's life when one just wants to be. Perhaps it's also because I've now come to believe in fate. How else would you have come into my life - and in those circumstances? (RWTB 153).

There are other references of humiliations and assaults on women's bodies. Gautam and Berry are sheltered at Gopinath Trivedi's home. They become the witness of a scene, which tells the tales of those who faced atrocities and humiliation to the extreme point: an episode of the public rape of a woman and stabbing

of her brother. When the young woman is caught and harassed, her brother stood close by with folded hands and begged them to let them go. One of the assaulters kicked him in the abdomen. "The man in dhoti drew near, and cried out: "Spare her, please--- she's my sister" (RWTB 59). The leader of the ruffians then said, "Good for her, we'll let you have her first so that she knows the difference between a grass eater and a beef eater". (RWTB 59)

The woman's brother went on requesting them to spare them as they were on their way to see their sick mother. On hearing this, one of them said:

Then we'll have your mother too. We'll ravish the whole lot of you--bloody grass-eaters!"

The man now began to tear away at the woman's sari, which came off, then the petticoat, the blouse, the bra, till she stood totally stripped, trying in vain to cover up her breasts with her hands." The leader then "pushed her against the wall, and was now pulling at her breasts".

For the first time Berry realized that such a public exposure of nudity could kill all sexual urge in a man" (RWTB 59-60)

When the women's brother tried to intervene, he was stabbed on the back. She pleaded not to kill her brother. She pleaded, "Kill me instead! (RWTB 59-60)

Gautam and Berry stood utterly helpless. Only when the police came, the mob dispersed with the woman and his brother could be saved. Seeing all these, Gautam heaved a sigh of relief and said, "I feel as though I'm through baptism of fire" (RWTB 63).

Thus, The novel by recording the victimization of women during partition resists the version of history presented in official documents and other public discourses and capture the complexity of women's daily lives.

Conclusion:

The readings of the selected narratives crystallize the fact that the novels *Adha Gaon* and *Basti* exhibit noticeable biases in the depiction of their women characters. In these texts female characters are projected only through their domesticity and institutional and patriarchal authority. Though the novels interrogate the state decision of Partition and contest the burial of the pluralistic past of India in the process of dividing India and Pakistan, they don't provide much space to the violence inflicted upon the bodies of women during and aftermath of partition.

However, the theme of woman's exploitation and forced institution has been depicted more poignantly and strongly in the novel *A River with Three Banks*. It is noticeable that in Kumar's novel the anguish and helplessness of women has found no less telling and sympathetic a voice than one may confront in the novels of women writers. In spite of the limits of a male writer's pen, he has made an authentic portrayal of what women went through during the partition, how women victims felt, how they survived the agony and faced the challenge of reconstructing their identities.

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