

Research Article

WOMEN AND PARTITION: NATION AND GENDER DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I have attempted to present an overview of the constructs of Gender and Nationalism to prove that the agenda of social, political and cultural groups prevalent at the times of Partition ensured a specific ideology for women which was diametrically opposed to the mindset of men. In view of the political agendas, cultural and religious propaganda, women suffered the most by remaining passive observers. The second paper in this series will reveal the same arguments through representations in literature of the times.

Keywords: Gender, Nationalism, Construct, Partition, Ideology.

INTRODUCTION

The treatment of women in novels of Partition provides an interesting insight into the psyche of the writer. The men in the novel may be revolutionary and treat their women with respect but the writer's gaze always reduces the woman to a 'piece of property', to be guarded and protected lest it falls into the hands of the enemy. It showed reality in all its nakedness. Whether it is Manto (Saadat Hasan Manto, Pakistani writer, 1912-1955, wrote in Urdu) with his stark portraits like 'Khol Do' (Open it) or Yashpal (Hindi novelist, 1903-1976) with his bold portrayals of naked women parading through the streets in 'Jhootha Sach', (False Truth) no writer is above his own conservative subjectivity as far as women are concerned. Here the woman writer stands apart because of the difference in treatment of women characters: she looks not at the stark reality of the 'body' but the emotional drama of the mind – the mental dilemma of the woman who in Amrita Pritam's (Punjabi writer, 1919-2006) 'Pinjar' (The Skeleton) cannot bring herself to forgive her husband because he is a Muslim and who in Attia Hosain's (Indian woman novelist, 1913-1998, wrote in English) 'Sunlight on a Broken Column' is repelled by the passionate zeal of her cousins who suddenly claim to be Pakistanis. Even Mumtaz Shah Nawaz (Pakistani woman writer, 1912-1948, wrote in Urdu) is real in her portrayal of this dilemma and brings out the conflict in the minds of her characters vividly. On one hand, we have women characters of Manto and Yashpal who are seen more as helpless victims in the chaotic atmosphere surrounding them and seen caught in a dichotomy with the changing world around, on the other the women writers bring out the psychological dilemma of being a woman more vividly in their central characters and their male counterparts, despite stark portrayals of their physical anguish lacking in dealing with the conflict in their minds. Women have been amongst the vehement bodies of society which have criticized the commonly prevailing nationalism that stabilizes a community and/or the nation state. They have had to exist differently within the nation: their difference from men as citizens, as well as members of native, communal, regional, class and caste groups they are affiliated to.

As Cynthia Enloe puts it:

Nationalist movements have rarely taken women's experiences as the starting points for an understanding of how a people becomes colonized, or how it throws off the shackles of that material and psychological domination. Rather, Nationalism has sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope. Anger at being emasculated...has been presumed to be the natural fuel for igniting a nationalist movement. (Enloe, p.45)

Women in Partition fiction represent the multifarious voices of conflict and reiterate that women's issues must be seen and examined in terms of their multiplicity and individual dynamics. The Partition period regiments and puts into perspective their specific encounters with colonialism, nationalism and post-coloniality. What is common is that in each of these women, we see strands of self-definition, self-exploration and survival. More work needs to be done on women's autobiographies, oral narratives, journals and fiction i.e., all those works that deal with personal and subjective areas. What is interesting here is the contrast between men and women's constructions of gender. Men wrote from the lens of generating national agendas in order to resist and challenge outsiders; women wrote of their lives. Men's fiction informed public opinion, that of women have still not been fully viewed and analyzed. The dismissal of women's voices needs to be opposed directly, because it is only their experience of the 'private' that divides the primary areas of women's oppression and exploitation. My attempt therefore is to look at these two discourses of gender and nation formation and their representation in the writings of both men and women associated with Partition and to re-examine certain areas of interest. The history of nationalism in India and the formation of a nationalist discourse encompassed within itself the issues of gender. I aim to discuss the emergence of nationalism and the gendered view of the nation it brought along, and then show how these are dealt with and represented in some of the Partition fiction of Hindi, Urdu and English language writers. Nationalism and its critical discourse in the background of the Indian National movement must make one think of Gandhi and Nehru. Gandhi's nationalism represented the new ideology of the nation. While at political level, morality has to be upheld, "in India whose fashioning I have worked all my life, every man enjoys equality of status whatever his religion is. The State is bound to be wholly secular" (Engineer, p.87) and "religion is a

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personal affair of each individual; it must not be mixed up with politics or National affairs.”(ibid. p.90) These along with other multiple statements gave birth to the new nation’s ideology. We should remind ourselves here that Gandhi was and is called the ‘Father of the Nation’ because of his very significant role in the Indian National movement. It was his leadership, which brought faith in the mass ideology, one that could resist the British Empire, leading to the freedom of India. It was his methodology which made people respond to him despite their religion and region, caste and gender, inspiring for a free India. Nehru’s views on Nationalism are quite different from Gandhi’s. In one of his many speeches on the British rule in India, he says: “by transforming British India into a single unitary state it has engendered amongst Indians a sense of political unity and thus fostered the first beginnings of Nationalism.” (Nehru, p.279) M.A.Jinnah put across a totally contrasting view on Nationalism of an emerging nation in his Presidential address at the All-India Muslim League Annual meeting, Lahore, 1940:

The problem in India is not of an intercommunal but manifestly of a National character and it must be treated as such...If the British govt. are really in earnest and sincere to secure the peace and happiness of the people of this subcontinent, the only course open to us all is to allow the major nations separate homelands, by dividing India into ‘autonomous national states’...It is a dream that the Hindus and Muslims ever evolve a common nationality and this misconception of one Indian Nation has gone far beyond the limits, and is the cause of most of our troubles and will lead India to destruction, if we fail to revise our notions in time. (Jinnah, web source)

The inherent conflict and contradiction lying in these three concepts of Nationalism led to the tragic event of Partition. Nehru wanted a peaceful relationship with the British; Gandhi believed in the ‘secular’ state and refused to compromise with the partition of the country and Jinnah’s extreme stance was totally uncompromising as far as the creation of Pakistan was concerned. However, the germinating points of this conflict were sown in the 19th century with the growth of nationalism that was definitely a Hindu one. Hindu Nationalism can be traced back to the cow protection movement of the later 19th century. In 1915, it gave birth to the origin of the Hindu Mahasabha. A motley group of Hindu aficionados, largely in UP and Punjab, the Mahasabha propagated cow protection and the Hindi language, and also educational and social welfare missions among Hindus generally. Its goals and membership were often parallel with Congress, for men like Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya were active in both the Congress and the Mahasabha. It was characterized by its propaganda of Sanskritized Hindi written in the Devanagari script. Gandhi, on the other hand was keen to create a language that would bring people together, and had advocated the use of the shared north Indian vernacular called Hindustani, written both in the Devanagari and Indo-Persian script. (Mahajan, 2000, Pp 45-46) Gender discourse, an intrinsic part of Nationalism, came about as a result of reform movements of the 19th century, and was focused on issues concerned with women, who stood for the maintenance of the moral and ethical centering and talked about child marriage, widow remarriage and in case of Muslims – the practice of polygamy. These significant reforms cut across religions and engaged Hindus as well as Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis and Indian Christians. Among Muslims, the case of the ‘Deobandis’ (Metcalf, p.225) suggests how a new focus on female behavior went beyond the western educated and those familiar with English. The influential volume *Bihishti Zewar*, written in Urdu by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi, a Deobandi reformer shows how a person who can influence others functioned within a distinctly Muslim tradition and yet was a part of the colonial context. (Thanawi,

full text) Printed as a guide for young girls, the documented scripture aims the female reader to become of ‘a middling alim’ [religious scholar], and an emblem of virtuous behavior. It includes suggestions on how widows could earn an income enough to have their independence, advice on handling new tasks like rail travel and precise tips on household management. Women were meant to be educated but within limits and they were meant to be mainly in their homes and under their husbands’ authority. As ParthaChatterji has told us, a new ideal of female who is at home, across religious lines also took shape during the decades at the turn of the century. (Chatterji, p.146-7) In that ideal, women were meant to be educated and ‘respectable’ according to the models of behavior prescribed by the govt; but also, to be saviors of their sacred religious traditions. There was thus, “a mapping of the image of the woman on to the image of the community.” (ibid. p.172) The woman was made to represent at once language [the goddess Tamilai in Tamilnadu, the Hindi queen ‘Nagri’ (Devnagari, the Hindi script) in contrast to the strumpet Begam Urdu], region [Bengal as Mother] and India itself as the Mother Goddess [Bharat Mata]. Always imagining the community entailed imagining an excluded other.”(Metcalf, p.152) In this way, the ‘woman’ came to be seen in terms of ‘Motherland’ whose sanctity had to be protected at all costs. In the celebrated novel ‘Anandamath’, (The Temple of happiness) Bankim (Bengali poet, 1838-1894) visualized the nation as the divine mother, who will be freed from the clutches of the Muslim marauders. ‘VandeMataram’ became the iconic prayer for the Freedom fighters after 1905:

VandeMataram, VandeMataram
Sujalam, Sufalam, MalayajaShitalam,
ShasyaShyاملam, mataram
Vandemataram
Shubhra jyotsna, pulkityaminim,
Phulla,kusumita, droomadalshobhinim
Suhasinim, sumadhurbhashinim...

[Mother, I bow to thee!
Rich with thy hurrying streams
Bright with thy orchard gleams
Cool with thy winds of delight,
Dark fields waving, mother of might Mother free...] (ibid. p.155)

By the late 19th century, the image of the woman, mythic and literary, had come to represent the very emblem of conservative ‘Indian’ values in the name of tradition. Recurring consistently, these ideas were depicted in the images of the chaste Hindu woman (the combined embodiments of wife, daughter and mother), representing the metaphor of a sacred, introspective, private space, needing protection from violation and western invasion. Therefore, the woman as metaphor for this sacred nation-state became fragile and vulnerable when Partition occurred. At the end of 1947, the Indian and Pakistani governments began work on the recovery operation. Both India and Pakistan put in an immense amount of effort in this mission of sending women arbitrarily to India and Pakistan without allowing them to exercise their free will. Incidents of abduction provoked a powerful rage. The political agenda took no account of what the women wanted. This forced repatriation continued till 1954. Women’s bodies are treated with a gendered form of communal vengeance when we look at Partition literature. The point of focus of the trauma in research studies has been the loss of one’s roots, dislocation, dispossession and the endless woes of the refugees. Till very recently, most of the theoretical frameworks were male defined and only when women took up the task of re-reading the past, a half-hearted attempt was made to balance the lopsided views and then people came to know the other side of the story.

As Julia Kristeva in her essay, 'Women's time' has pointed out, cultural history is not simply a psychoanalysis and semiotics but is a powerful critique and redefinition of the nation as a space for the emergence of feminist politics. The nation as a symbolic denominator is according to Kristeva, a powerful repository of cultural knowledge that erases the rationalist and progressive logics of the 'canonical' nation. (Kristeva, p.187-213) Some of these partition narratives have presented exemplary tales of courage, strength and perseverance and thus given a legitimate place to the hitherto invisible woman in nation-construction, creating a piece of profound complexity that has shaped the narratives of dislocation. Some of these writings address unsaid and unwritten parts of history, and especially women's histories that are inherent in the histories of nation formation but which have been few and far between in the margins, if not wholly erased. As Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid point out in their introduction to *Recasting Women*:

The process of the formation of the private sphere as an indigenist alternative to western materialism is in a sense, instituted at the beginning of the 19th century and sets out to establish a series of oppositions between male vs. female, inner vs. outer, public vs. private, material vs. spiritual... the repositioning of cultural forms, then is implicated in the formation of a predominantly middle class public sphere in a desired version of Indian culture and in desired versions of ideal women. It is also at the same time implicated in a new formation of the home as the insulated private sphere, which is to be free from even temporary challenges to male authority... (Sangari, p.248)

The Partition riots of 1946-47 and the destruction of community ties that they incorporated treated women's bodies as a site for the identification of enemy. According to the same skewed patriarchal reasoning that resulted in the raping and abducting of women from the 'other' religious community (Muslim), the 'purity' of Hindu and Sikh women became an essential criterion for their belonging to the new nation in the communal violence surging through Partition. Hindu and Sikh women sometimes committed suicide or were murdered by their own community and these acts—designed to curb the enemy's aims to dishonor the nation by violating its women—were applauded as self-sacrifice. The Hindus in India viewed Partition as the loss of territory of 'Ancient Bharat.' The Nationalists pointed out, time and again that the *bahir* (Outside) the material world may have been adversely affected by the western invasion but the world of *ghar* (Home) remained pure and uncorrupted. No impositions and negotiations by the colonizer must be permanent.

In her essay *Gender and Nation: Some reflections from India*, Urvashi Butalia tells us that:

The nation is a male construct, women are generally left out of the process of nation making and that their relationship to such a process or indeed to the nation itself is a nebulous one...there are times when women might choose to stay out of the process of nation making or their priorities might simply be different. But there are times when they may wish to be involved and find it difficult to do so. It is also true that women are often complicit in giving strength and legitimacy to patriarchal constructs of the nation. (Butalia, p.109)

CONCLUSION

At a purely physical level, women's bodies are symbols of the fragility of borders; in other words, women are the 'border' because they are "signifiers of ethnic or national difference" (Bhasin, p.89) "In many villages where negotiations had taken place, often women were traded for freedom." (Butalia, p.133) What I'd like to present is in the second part of my two-part series is an analysis of some Partition writings as representative texts of women's experience of social alienation, following their rape and experience sat home and in their communities. The violated women are faced with the loss of their self-esteem through the violent event as abducted women were uniformly dismissed and abandoned across divergent cases of caste and religion. Partition writings measure the costs of that ideology.

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