

THE SKELETON AND THE RIVER CHURNING: PARTITION OF BODY OR MIND?

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Abstract: *This paper endeavours to trace the effect of partition on women, who were abducted, converted, married and afterwards recuperated by the state. The aim of this paper is to investigate into the life of women who were not only physically tormented but also mentally dislocated, endured displacement and lost their identity in a patriarchal society due to Partition. This study will ponder more profoundly into the sufferings that women of the sub-continent had to experience because of the division of the nation on the basis of religion. This study will also enable us to evaluate the condition of women during and after partition as depicted by Amrita Pritam and Jyotirmoyee Devi in their novels 'The Skeleton' and 'The River Churning'. The purpose of this research is to find out the post-partition effects on women which were perhaps more of mental than physical.*

Keywords: *Partition, women, abduction, dislocation, sufferings.*

We begin to discern some specific features of 'communal' crimes against women...women's sexuality symbolises 'man-hood'; its desecration is a matter of such shame and dishonour that it has to be avenged...it is women ultimately who are most violently dealt with as a consequence.
- *Borders and Boundaries* (1998)

According to Ramchandra Guha, during partition the people who were 'marginalised' ...mostly remained its ill-fated victims while others fell to villainy. Partition history can be described as somewhat political and gendered to some extent because Partition validated the execution of savagery against women by their own kith and kin, indirectly referred to as 'honour killings'. This was justified as a pre-emptive action to protect the honour of the women. Thus the patriarchal community unburdened itself by giving legitimacy to its own acts of violence. This has been very well portrayed in two very well-known Partition novels-- Amrita Pritam's *The Skeleton* and Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning*.

The Skeleton is the story of Puro, who is ostracized by her own family and society when she was abducted by a Muslim boy, Rasheed before Partition. Puro is converted into Islam after becoming Rasheed's wife. She is given a new Muslim name Hamida. She begins to suffer from identity crisis and becomes a hopeless skeleton, finding herself in the cage of Rasheed. Amrita Pritam writes: "she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name" (Pritam 25). The novel accurately portrays the life of a woman before Partition who was kidnapped by a Muslim lad. She was discarded by her family, her name was distorted and her religion was transformed after she was married to the man who abducted her. These circumstances reduced her to only a soulless skeleton. But still she tried to live her life in spite of the pain and sufferings.

The River Churning vividly portrays the mental trauma of a abandoned woman through the protagonist Sutara. This novel focuses on the viciousness and possibly the rape of a Hindu girl in East Bengal and her consequent marginalization by her own community in post-Partition India. While portraying the emotional torment of Sutara, Jyotirmoyee Devi brings out how male animosity and socially condoned patriarchal values make women pay for crimes of which they are the chief victims. In, "Nobody

realized that people would suffer so much houses burnt down, neighbours killing each other, and women being abducted and raped... There was darkness all around. How could so many millions be dispossessed and displaced?" (Bhatia 7)

Sutara's inner turmoil rolled down in the form of tears. Her pathetic mental state is evident when "she could not say any more, tears welled up in her eyes." (Devi 140), "Wiping her eyes, she embraced Sutara with her left arm. Tears rained down from her eyes." (138), "At the end, her tears dropped on my hand." (213), "Tears stream down Pramod's hand ... tears brook no end." (244) In fact, the expression 'tears' is repeated to highlight the tragedy of Sutara and thousands of women like her whose lives drastically changed for the worst after Partition. This silent expression acts as the most persuasive though wordless comment on the displacement and violence caused by Partition. Since the Vedic ages, woman's body has been a site of contest in India. Indian epics like Mahabharata and the Ramayana also are the examples of age antique maltreatment, torture, suppression, beating and humiliation of women.

Puro and Sutara are the epitomes of violence against women, loss of humanity and ultimate surrender to existential fate. They highlight the women's sufferings, exploitation and sacrifices because of their dislocation during partition. Both of them act as mouthpieces of the authors who have tried to focus upon the problems faced by women during the time of Partition of India. There were cases of rape and abduction of young women of not only opposite community but sometimes even of the same community. The women had been used just as an image of the tale of non-stop wounds of patriarchy and partition and how it turned humans into skeleton. Accordingly abduction and rape of women of one community by men of the other became a way of 'dishonouring' the other as actual and symbolic subjugation. 'Abduction' signified the assertion of the identity of one community over its rival counterpart through the appropriation of its women. A corollary to abduction was forcible conversion and marriage, which was perceived as an outrage to the family, community honour and a grave setback to the religious sentiment. Inherent in these acts also are the notions of women as belongings. In both the cases it is the women that suffer the humiliation. This is evident when Puro's father says, "Dear daughter, it is your fate! We are helpless." It is the social stigma of abduction that is responsible for Puro's ostracization and it is further clear from her mother's comments: "Who will marry you now? You are defiled! Your religion is polluted" (Pritam 28).

The same tone resonates in the voice of Amulya Babu when he says about Sutara:

A lost girl was never taken back, even her parents would shut their door on her. Society had a rigid stand, it was never moved by tales of woe of abducted and displaced women. Perhaps Sutara's own parents would have disowned her. This has been going on since the time of Amba of *The Mahabharata* and Sita of *The Ramayana*. (Devi 47)

Thus both the authors tried to highlight that women had to continually demonstrate their guiltlessness and attest their right to respect in our patriarchal society. Both the novels show that the exploitation of women spread in large scale during the Partition because the background of the peace war between the communities and the Partition were based on the community quarrel. Puro and Sutara become the symbol of what women had to endure during Partition. There is not much distinction between the Partition's political infringement of the country and its results of real infringement of women. The status of women in *The Skeleton* and *The River Churning* is to symbolize how the nation's status was abused during Partition.

Puro and Sutara are the violated women characters who bring forth the fact that women have been the prime victims in every communal strife, riots and wars. As Dr Archana Sinha puts it, "It has been quite disturbing experience all over the world that any conflict, a war, civil strife, communal riots or disturbance women and children became the prime victims of violence. Children are orphaned and women are not only widowed but also become victim of rape and abduction" (p.43)

Whether it was Puro or Sutara, woman became the 'other' not only during partition but even today. That 'other' whose lives did not matter to anybody, whose voices are silenced, whose identities were oppressed and who remained at the fringe of power struggle and power equation and continued to be marginalized, uprooted and displaced at the cost of the self. The novels thus give a voice to this 'other' and their concerns of dislocation, marginalization, dual identity and powerlessness. These women were themselves so profoundly affected by their trauma and disgrace on being raped or converted, that they, considered themselves as sinners and denied to go back to their families. The effects of Partition on Puro and Sutara were more mental than physical. The wounds that were inflicted on their body and mind during abduction or assault would have healed with the passing time but the continuous reminder of that incident throughout their lives added to their trauma. With each passing day and fleeting seconds their own family members did not let them forget what they had gone through and held them responsible for their own fates. They had to bear the consequences as victims of the incidents that were not their choice, for the sole reason of being born as women.

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