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The Anguish and Misery of Displacement and Uprooting in Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*

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Abstract

During times of communal violence, the assault on the body of women signifies as the assault on the honour of the community from which women belong to. Throughout the communal frenzy of India's Partition, the act of molestation of women was committed as if it were a weapon in humiliating the rival community. The brutal act of abduction of women and young girls of the opposite community and their forced conversion was treated as an attainment of high order. When the passion of violence reigns the sanity of conflicting men of two communities, women of the rival community becomes the worst victims. Women's mutilation, cutting off their breasts, and parading the forcefully naked women and young girls down the streets were such acts of insanity committed by those who were once friends and closely related neighbours. The brutality and barbarity meted out to thousands of women during the partition upheaval in 1947 is unprecedented. Thus an attempt has been put to unveil the reality of this anguish and misery of displacement and uprooting in Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*.

Keywords: abduction, amputation, cataclysmic, communal, devastating, migration, rape, etc.

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The Partition of India is one of the most devastating and defining events in the history of mankind that is marked with an unprecedented mass migration. In the forced migration, millions of people were displaced, leaving behind their beloved home, in search of their new home, where there was in reality no home. In the ordeal of their search for new home, thousands of children, young and old failed to make it and fell prey of exhaustion, illness or diseases. In the cataclysmic Partition, women and young girls were targeted by the communal frenzied mob, ruthlessly abusing their bodies, associating their abduction, rapes, mutilation and amputation as the victory of their region and the defeat of the rival community. Dishonouring the women of the enemy community was taken as the honour of the fighting community. Even the children and weak old men were not spared from the butchery of the insane rioters. In *Borders and Boundaries*, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin wrote:

*By the time the exodus was finally over,
about eight to ten
million people had crossed over from
Punjab and Bengal
– the largest peace-time mass migration
in history– and
about 500,000–1,000,000 had perished.
The exchange,
at least as far as Punjab was concerned,
was as nearly
equal as can be imagined: the total non-
Muslim
population of Punjab in 1941 was
4,357,477, the
total Muslim population, 4,286,755.
(35).*

Within no time, the placid and tranquil life of the people turned into turmoil. Leaving one's home is in itself a trauma. Uprooting from the deep rooted place of ancestors and to be displaced causes deep agony in the psyches of the sufferers. Widespread killings, sexual savagery, abduction of young girls and women, forced religious conversion caused people to move to their new destination with agonized and tormented heart. In *Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*,

Urvashi Butalia asserts:

*“Thousands of families were divided,
homes were destroyed...villages
abandoned.” (p.3)*

In *Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacies of India's Partition*, Hajari asserts:

*Gangs of killers set whole villages aflame,
hacking to
death men and children and the aged while
carrying
off young women to be raped ... Partition's
brutalities
were worse: pregnant women had their
breasts cut off
and babies hacked out of their bellies;
infants were
found literally roasted on spits...Special
refugee trains,
filled to bursting when they set out,
suffered repeated*

*ambushes long the way. All too often
they crossed the
border in funeral silence, blood seeping
from under
their carriage doors. (Hajari xvii)*

The people, who survived the brutality and barbarity of communal riots, were in traumatic state. They were forced to be displaced from their place of birth, from their kin and friends. The boundary commission not only divided India into two countries India and Pakistan but also divided the heart of two communities Hindus and Sikhs, one side, and Muslims on the other side. The gradual fragmentation of two communities became completely wide apart. The agony of the displaced can be felt very intrinsically in Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's interview of Somavanti, published in *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. She said:

*“But I have no country now. This is not
ours,
that is no more ours ... Now there is no
country.
Earlier we had a home, a country,
because
we belonged there. Now we belong*

nowhere ... All that has gone, finished."
(220)

Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin wrote:

For the vast majority, "country" was something they

had always thought of as the place where they were

born and where they would like to die. Now, suddenly,

their place of birth was horribly at odds with nationality;

had nothing to do with it, in fact. And the place now

called country, they felt little attachment to. Quite

unexpectedly, and certainly unwillingly, they were violently

uprooted and relocated in places and among communities

they could not identify with, people they thought of as strangers. (229)

The effect of trauma underwent by the young girls and women during the Partition upheaval and violence was drastic. The fact of being dishonored and stigma of disgrace was highly agonizing as they were socially rejected as well. In *The Geography of Scars and History of Pain*, Vanashree Tripathy wrote:

"... The awful profligacy, the ugliness, sordidness and

deceit converge into an agony ... that transcend physical

and rational levels and expose us to secret logic of

human desire and depravity— (133)

In *Borders and Boundaries*, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin record the interview of Taran, a man who survived the Partition riots, represents the agony and suffering of millions of people:

"... where is my country? ...my country is where I was born ...

Country is where you feel at home, where you are accepted,

where you know the smell of the land, the culture, where you

can breathe freely, think freely ...if I cannot call a home

my own, if my home is not mine, how can a country be mine? (248)

Freedom of India from the shackles of British slavery was expected to be a moment of rapture and joy, but it brought terrifying outbreak of sectarian violence and displacement of millions of people—some were fortunate enough to make it, while hundreds of others never made it. Gangs of killers set the whole villages on fire. Rape of women was used as a weapon by the mob. Slogans like "Pakistan Zindabad" were engraved on the bodies of women. According to Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin:

"Amputating her breasts at once desexualizes a

woman and negates her as wife and mother;

no longer a nurturer (if she survives, that is)

she remains a permanently inauspicious figure,

almost as undesirable as a barren woman." (44)

Exposing the patriarchal mentality against women, B. Pandey aptly asserted:

"... the rape of a woman is akin to the rape of the community to which she belongs." (105)

Humiliation of women was taken as the sadistic pleasure by the perpetrators. A large number of women on both sides were subjected to stripping and nude processions after being abducted by the mob of the opposite community. Some of them were raped publicly and brutally set fire to in the public. Illustrating the agony of the raped women, Chinkin stated:

"The social stigma associated with rape renders a raped

woman unmarriedable, deprived of respect in society

and traumatised for the rest of her life. In some cases

women become unacceptable even to their own families" (4–5)

The most pathetic and heart rending aspect of the brutality occurred when a large number of women were poisoned, strangled or burnt to death, forced to be drowned in the wells or shot to death at the hands of their own family members for the sake of preserving their honour to avoid being 'dishonoured'. It is said that they preferred committing suicide. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin wrote:

Virsa Singh claimed that he had shot 50 women

personally. First he shot his own wife because

the Muslims came to get them. Once he had

done this, all the women in the neighbourhood

gathered round, saying "Viran, pehle mannu maar,

pehle mannu maar." (Brother, kill me first.) Some

would push their daughters forward, saying,

"Shoot her, put a bullet through her now."

He says he just kept shooting and shooting.

"They kept bringing them forward I kept shooting.

There was shooting all around. At least 50 or 60

women I shot—my wife, my mother, daughter ..." (49)

Protecting woman's honour i.e. her chastity, was protecting the honour of the family. If woman's honour is lost, entire family's honour is lost. Woman's body was considered as the repository of man's honour. According to Pandey:

"The rape of a woman is akin to the rape of the community to which she belongs." (105)

Sarkar asserts:

"Same patriarchal order that designates the female

body as the symbol of lineage and community purity,

would designate the entire collectivity as impure

and polluted, once the woman is raped by an outsider." (2875)

To avert sexual assault and molestation of women, male members strangled or poisoned the women of their families to save them and the family from being 'dishonoured.' Some women committed suicide, willingly or forcefully, by jumping into the wells.

Partition aftermath affected Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims with equal measure but it were the women who had to bear the burn more than men. In the period of wide spread insanity, thousands of women were abducted and kept as permanent hostages, concubines or forcefully married in the other religion. Speaking about the pathetic conditions of some recovered women, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin narrated:

"They were mostly young. Even the widows were

young and most of those who were picked up

were unmarried. Muslims who abducted them

married them, others perhaps just kept them ...

Some women from good families had gone

into the hands of bad Muslims." (177)

Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin wrote:

... Sometimes when the women got together to tell

their stories, their crying and wailing were almost

unbearable. They would wear red dupattas and

sit down and wail in different voices ... from

Multan, from Muzaffarnagar, Dera Ismail Khan,

the Frontier. They cried so bitterly we never knew

whether we would be able to sleep in peace. Listening

to them cry, I learnt to forget my troubles ... (147)

Conclusion:

The orgy of violence not only took a heavy toll of life but also caused millions of people to suffer the agony of displacement, destitution and dislocation. The trauma and turmoil experienced and endured by the women was unexpected. The way, women were targeted by the communal mob, was horrible. It were the women who badly suffered the consequences of the communal holocaust. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* examines and explores the pain and sufferings of the women who were brutally victimized during the Partition violence. The wounds of Partition have deeper implications in the psyches of women who survived the holocaust, but to bear the agonizing memories of their past.

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