

Women Suffering In Saadat Hasan Manto's Short -Stories During Partition Of India

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Abstract

One of the profound truths encompassing our religious scriptures is the invaluable role of a woman in sustaining life . she like the “mother earth” and “ mother nature” is the epitome of selfless love, care and tolerance. The partition of India is one of the most gruesome period that blemished the essence of womankind. The whole Punjab went through volatile metamorphosis during the partition riots and women were the most victimized of all. Woman's body during communal riots constituted a religious and cultural symbol, which if raped or abducted dishonoured the whole community. Saadat Hasan Manto in his short-stories has condemned and projected how women were rendered as mere “property” to be confiscated or demolished. This victimization and suffering of women became a marked feature of partition literature. Manto being a Progressive writer exposed the women suppression in a patriarchal society obsessed with communal hatred. His characters are rendered transparent because they are depicted with psychological insights.

Key Words: Women, Communal, patriarchy, rape, partition and suffering.

The history has rendered women merely as an object of beauty or lust to be forcefully grabbed or destroyed like property. Women in India suffered the most during the partition communal riots when they were forcefully abducted and married, raped or brutally killed. The two communities, Hindus and Muslims held their women in high reverence as symbols of family's honour and prestige , therefore, both the communities dishonoured each others' women savagely. “ The female body became territory to be fought over, conquered and subsequently branded by the assailant through rape or disfigurement” (Pennebaker Web) The abducted women were not only victimized in terms of physical violence but dislocation too. After the abduction of the woman her natal ties with her family were broken and her fate rested in the hands of her abductor. Women who managed to reach back to their families were rebuffed by their own families as they were contaminated by other men “women had to constantly prove their innocence and assert their rights to dignity in our patriarchal society” (Singh 31).As the women were the soft targets of partition, they were not safe even at the military camps. The

camps were often attacked by mob and it turned the camps into torture camps. While many women died at the hands of brutal man, there were some women who themselves ended their lives to preserve their chastity and family's honour. Many of them jumped into the nearest well or set themselves ablaze. Many a times, "all the women in a family committed mass suicide." (Pennebaker Web). In other cases the women were killed by their own kin. When law and order situation went out of control, India and Pakistan after the partition, at a meeting held on 6th Dec., 1947 passed a bill called the "Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Bill." The passing of the Bill activated the process of women rehabilitation but soon proved to be ineffective and failed to protect the interests of women. On account of the fear of violence, the local authorities in Pakistan avoided taking actions against Pathans who have abducted Hindu and Sikh girls. The law makers become the law breakers. Many women refused to return to their families. "They were too afraid of the rigidity of the caste system and were overconscious of having lost their chastity" (Singh 143). This further delayed the rehabilitation work.

When communal frenzy subsided after the partition, the women suffering took a more devilish form. Many women who were forcefully impregnated were forced to undergo abortions which resulted in their deaths. The victimization of woman during partition became one of the marked features of the partition literature. The Progressive Urdu short-story writers gave an account of the time with deep agony. Joginder Paul remarked, "The predicament of the Indian women also attracted these writers to lay bare male chauvinism" (831). The progressive writers were full of rage and they exposed the women suppression in a male dominated society. By the time Saadat Hasan Manto took to writing, feminist criticism was at its acme. His writings focused on, "voicing the absent, the silenced and the inarticulate" (Kumar 103).

Manto's short-stories: "The Return" and "Colder than Ice" describe the women suffering and her struggle against the brutal forces of men during the partition days of India. "The Return" relates to the year that witnessed women suffering which could be described as the worst in this century. The story stresses upon the traumatic experience of a young girl, Sakina during the communal riots in Amritsar. The story begins with the mention of a refugee train that leaves Amritsar at two in the afternoon. The beginning states the bloodshed in the train while it heads towards Lahore. Sirajuddin is one of the Muslim passengers who undergoes emotional crisis, during his journey. At ten o' clock in Lahore's railway station he gains consciousness, surrounded by screaming men and women. He was in utter state of shock. The next moment, "a succession of images raced through his mind. Attack...fire...escape...railway station...night...Sakina" (50). Immediately he becomes aware of the fact that he has lost his daughter, Sakina. He tries his best to search for her but soon gives up the search. He recollects the moment when he was separated from Sakina and his wife. "The dead body of his wife, her stomach ripped open. It was an image that wouldn't go away"(50). He recalls how he managed to get Sakina along with him on the train but soon his hope of her survival breaks as he views human suffering around him. Few days have passed and one day Sirajuddin comes across eight armymen who were deployed by the Pakistani government to get back all the left behind women across the border. He nurtures a small hope and asks them to get back his lost daughter by giving her description.

During the next trip to India, the armymen come across a girl on the roadside. They jump out of the truck and chase her. As she apprehends a threat to her life, she runs away from

them. Approaching her one of them says, “Don’t be frightened. Is your name Sakina?”(52). Slowly she gains confidence in them and agrees to go along with them. The young men treat her very kindly and from this point Manto introduces a dramatic twist in the story. Many days have passed but Sirajuddin fails to get any news about his lost daughter. One day, he comes across the same army men and asks them, “Have you found Sakina, my daughter?” (52). They deny of having found her and the father loses heart. The same evening tension rises in the refugee camp when he comes across four men carrying the body of a young girl found unconscious near the railway tracks. They were taking her to the camp hospital Sirajuddin follows them and discovers the young girl to be his daughter, Sakina. She was brutally gang raped by the army men who saved her for their own lustful motive. The doctor asks Sirajuddin to open the window in the room and the half-dead girl, “On hearing male voices, she like a battered animal”(Bhalla XXXII). pulls her shalwar down. The Hindi title of story, “Khol do” acquire significance in the end. Sakina was physically alive but mentally dead. The ending becomes highly sensitive because Sirajuddin was too glad to found his daughter and fails to realize that his daughter has been raped. On the other hand, the doctor breaks in cold sweat at her gestures. “The Return” is Manto’s protest against the community which claims to protect the citizens. “The community of the trusted protectors is an illusion, a monstrous fraud, for the fence eats the field and the revolution devours its own children” (Joshi 152).

The traumatic experience of partition shook Manto to roots and compelled him to vent out his ire at the terrible scenario which claimed innumerable lives of women and “Colder Than Ice” is Manto’s supreme achievement and an example of it. The patriarchal society raised its eyebrows when the story echoing the acute agony of a girl, with explicit descriptions appeared in writing. The story very boldly presented the women suffering and its enormous impact upon the mind of a Sikh man. The story begins past midnight when Ishwar Singh enters the room of his mistress, Kalwant Kaur and she questions him about his whereabouts. She asks him what went wrong last night after he decorated her with the gold ornaments, looted from the Muslim home. He continues to fondle her, tries to divert her attention and snuggles her. He kisses and hugs her followed by their fierce love-making but for the first time he is unable to satisfy her sexually. He reacts so coldly that Kalwant suspects him of having ties with another woman. She at once says, “Swear to me on the Guru’s sacred name, is there a woman?” (22). She repeats again and finally Ishwar nods his head in assent. She questions him about the woman’s identity but he maintains silence. Provoked by his reluctance to reveal the identity of the woman, she brutally wounds him with his “Kirpan”. “Blood splattered out of the deep gash like water out of a foundation” (22).

As the story unfolds, Manto introduces the inner turmoil of Ishwar. Partly out of penitence and partly to recompense for Kalwant’s rage, he reveals her the truth and somehow manages to calm her down. He states that he joined a group of Sikh men to loot Muslim shops and homes in the city. The gold ornaments he presented her were looted from one of the Muslim homes. He tells her how he, accompanied by other men, entered a Muslim home and he killed six of the family members but couldn’t kill the beautiful girl. He thought, “you gorge yourself on Kalwant kaur everyday ... how about a mouthful of this luscious fruit” (23). He carried the girl on his shoulder near a canal and raped her. With difficulty, he tells Kalwant, “She was dead... I had carried a dead body... a heap of cold flesh”(24). When Ishwar’s sexual

hunger subsided, he realized that he copulated with a dead flesh. This shook his mind and soul. After listening to his confession, Kalwant places her hand on his hand and realizes that it has turned “Colder Than Ice”. Manto got under the skin of his characters and wrote about their inner turmoils with sharp insight. The story’s major concern has been the uncovering of the sinful act of “necrophilic” rape. Manto has given tremendous psychological depth to the story. Manto correlated his inability to mate with his mistress with his dreadful act of raping a dead girl. “Colder Than Ice” brought Manto into the midst of controversies. Like “The Return” it too earned him the label of an “obscene” writer. The story was banned by the Punjab government but Manto denied such allegations. He boldly stated that the event on which the story was based was itself obscene. The time was so disdainful that the whole of society was obscene.

Taslima Nasrin’s *Lajja* is a famous novel which too portrays the devastating effect of communal hatred on women and can be compared with Manto’s theme of women suffering. It is another important reflection upon the, “humanity’s struggle to assert its innate and inherent rights torn asunder by the forces of religious fundamentalism and blind fanaticism” (Swain 107). Written on the event of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Dec. 6, 1992, *Lajja* confirms the truth that communalism is the enemy of humanity. She is a rabid feminist and like Manto courted controversy as a means of stoking the fire of her passionate need to be heard. *Lajja* too like “Colder Than Ice” was banned by the Bangladesh government and it issued a “fatwa” for Taslima. The novel laid bare the Hindu suffering at the hands of Muslim majority in Bangladesh. Taslima like Manto was deeply moved by women suffering during communal riots and projected authentically their brutal victimization. She remarked, “woman after all were like commodities and therefore stolen just like gold and silver.” (Nasrin 162). The novel created a rage among the Mullahs on account of the graphic description of Muslim woman’s rape by a Hindu man. Suranjan, a Hindu boy was deeply hurt by his family’s misfortune and his sister, Maya’s abduction by Muslim men. Being aware of the critical condition of the Hindus as a minor community, he dares not to abduct and rape a Muslim girl. Therefore to vent out his anger and cool down the burning volcano in his heart, he hires a Muslim prostitute, brutally rape and wounds her apart:

The rape of the girl is as blood freezing as the rape of the girl in “Colder Than Ice”. The rape becomes suggestive of the grievances nursed by the Hindus in Bangladesh. After raping the girl, Suranjan says, “Yes, Hindus also know how to rape. They too had hands, feet and a head full of ideas (Nasrin 201).

Manto believed that a writer feels compelled to pick up a pen to write about the suffering humanity only due to one reason, empathy. It is the product of heightened sensitivity and deep insight. The agony felt by Manto at the savage victimization of women was poured out in his short-stories. These stories depicted the sinister impact of communal hatred which charged men for rapes and murders. Manto through these stories reached the rung that none of his contemporaries could ever reach. He kept his conviction strong and wrote despite controversies. These stories are a sincere endeavour to lay bare the women suffering as the product of communal violence and hatred.

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