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Homing in on "the Unhomed": A Reading of Rajinder Singh Bedi's "Lajwanti" and Jamila Hashmi's "Banished"

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"The political programme of creating the two nations of India and Pakistan was inscribed upon the bodies of women" (Das 56). Veena Das' statement succinctly sums up the predicament of women as well as points out the centrality that their gendered identities assumed in the wake of the vivisection of the subcontinent. Either as victims of rape, mutilation and murder, whose bodies and identities were erased by males of the other community, or as "martyrs" who chose to, or rather were forced to end their lives in an effort to maintain the "purity" and "honour" of their own communities, women were "centrally implicated" in the historic exercise of imagining and crystallizing religious and national identities in 1947 (Butalia, "Muslims and Hindus" 59). Particularly poignant has been the ordeal of thousands of women on both sides of the newly created Radcliffe Line, who, as Urvashi Butalia points out:

> …were abducted, raped, forced to convert, forced into marriage, forced back into what the two states defined as "their proper homes," torn apart from their families once during the Partition by those who abducted them, and again, after the Partition by the State which tried to 'recover' and 'rehabilitate' them" ("Community, State, and Gender" 183).

Thus, for the abducted/recovered women, though the experience of Partition involved a re-negotiation with questions of identity, home and nation, it was the "afterlife" of the event that proved to be even more shattering than the actual division. As national boundaries crystallized and amidst increasing complaints of missing women on both of the border, finally, in 1949, the legislation of The Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Bill by the state to "recover" and "restore" these women led to an utter decimation of their identities and homes. The Bill, in a single stroke, was responsible in reducing women to the position of mere chattel and inflicted unimaginable pain on the already traumatized women. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin highlight the flawed approach of the state by noting that the Bill refused to differentiate between abducted women and women who, taking advantage of the unsettled times chose to marry men outside their faith, thereby categorizing all women living with men outside their religious community as "abducted". Moreover, the state also did not take into account the will of the women involved. In the intervening years, many abducted women had reconciled with their new lives and settled in their new homes. A number of such women had also borne children by their abductors. Furthermore, as "dishonoured" and "defiled" women, they were assailed by the fear of rejection, strongly believing that they would never be accepted by their original families. This fear was not misplaced. Even national leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru had to publicly appeal to families to accept the recovered women. Thus, given the complexities involved, it is not surprising that many women questioned and actively resisted the state's largely coercive attempts to recover them. Factors that the recovered women met with severe social ostracism and suffered emotionally on account of being separated from their families and children and were largely even disowned did not count. Thus, these women were appropriated and dislocated twice—first, in order to breach the ranks of a community, and again,

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by the state that sought to control women's sexuality in order to construct and insulate communitarian and national boundaries. Urvashi Butalia foregrounds the patriarchal nature of the whole exercise:

> This vocabulary of recovery, rehabilitation, and homeland was actually a euphemism for returning Hindu and Sikh women to the Hindu and Sikh fold, and Muslim women to the Muslim fold…Even for a nation like India that defined itself as secular, then, the natural place/homeland for women was defined in religious, indeed communal terms…Women who had been taken away by the 'other' community had to be brought back to their 'own' community and their own homeland—the concept of belonging and otherness were of course defined for women by the men of the respective countries. They themselves did not have a choice ("Community, State, and Gender" 189).

However, why did the state, in the first place, undertake this massive exercise which only led to an utter disruption and fragmentation of women's lives? What did the state achieve by forcibly recovering these women? When every citizen, at least theoretically, had the right to choose between India and Pakistan, why were the abducted women not allowed to exercise their own agency? Nira Yuval-Davis and Flora Anthias have put forward the viewpoint that there are five major ways in which women tend to participate in ethnic and national processes and in relation to state practices. (a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities; (b) as reproducers of the boundaries of national or ethnic groups; (c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity as transmitters of culture, (d) as signifiers of ethnic or national differences and lastly as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles (7). Thus, in any nationalist discourse, women play a central role in the imagination and construction of the nation-state where the nation is often venerated as a female, especially as a mother drawing upon images of purity, honour, and nurture, while, at the same time, their bodies render them vulnerable to the "outsider" or the "other". If nation is imagined as a woman, then nationalism inevitably becomes a patriarchal construct. Benedict Anderson also speaks about how the brotherhood of "deep comradeship" is essentially a male fraternity in which women are enshrined as the "mother" and the trope of nation-as-woman "further secures male-male arrangements and an all male history" (Introduction). So, nation as a woman has to be protected, its boundaries insulated and national honour becomes equivalent to female honour. Partition, itself has been constructed as a violation of the country usually referred to in feminine terms as *Bharatmata.* Therefore, the recovery of these women was vital to the sustenance of what is largely termed as "national honour". For the Indian state, the abduction of Hindu women and their conversion to Islam amounted to a transgression of sexual and national boundaries. Seen from this perspective, it symbolically suggested the emasculation of the state and their recovery can be read as the reclamation of the sanctity of male honour and an assertion of India's image as a civilised state.

Hence, caught between the state's male-centred and authoritarian perspective and their own untold misery, the abducted/recovered women came to exist in a "no man's land" whose relationships with people, places and institutions were radical altered in the wake of 1947. The present paper, through an analysis of Rajinder Singh Bedi's short story "Lajwanti" and Jamila Hashmi's story "Banished", attempts to

examine the concept and representation of "home" as brought out in a world of conflict and upheaval. The two stories problematise the concept of home and juxtapose its utopian and dystopian facets against the backdrop of violence, rejection and alienation. Though these stories share the ethos of Partition, they represent disparate discourses on "woman" and "home". While "Lajwanti" privileges the subjectivity of the "recovered" woman, "Banished" explores the consciousness of the "abducted" woman. Both stories complement each other, and give a voice to the anguish of the abducted woman in different ways. The two stories begin in media res and instead of concentrating on the physical aspect of violence explore the emotional ramifications of the trauma of abduction and recovery, which is largely ignored or silenced in official/nationalist historiographies.

Rajinder Singh Bedi's "Lajwanti" addresses an issue which was at the heart of the ongoing debate on the recovery work. One of the main reasons why this exercise was regarded as controversial, beset with difficulties was the illusory nature of success in this work. If the state, in a very humanitarian frame of mind had decided to recover and restore these women to their families, then did it succeed? And if so, were these women wholeheartedly accepted? In the story, Mulla Shakoor mohalla, the riot-stricken town of post-Partition East Punjab functions as the microcosm where the debate regarding the fate of the abducted women is carried out at the grass root level. The story contains two perspectives—one conservative or traditional and the other reformist or nationalist. Through the figure of the priest, Baba Narain Das, Bedi demonstrates how the vortex of religion and patriarchy, evident in entrenched notions of honour and shame are used to influence the minds of people, preaching that women who have lived with men of other religion should not be accepted. As the text outlines:

> Why did they not die? Why did they not take poison to preserve their chastity? Why didn't they jump into the well to save their honour? They were cowards who basely and desperately clung to life. Why thousands of women had killed themselves before they could be forced to yield their honour and chastity? (181)

On the other hand, Sunder Lal, the secretary of the rehabilitation committee believed that "these women were blameless…a prey to the brutal passion of rioters" (180). As the fragile leaves of the touch-me-not plant, they were delicate and a "society which does not accept these innocent women is rotten and deserves to be destroyed… (180). Consequently, along with his friends, Neki Ram, Rasalu and Vakil Chand, Sunder Lal leads prabhat pheris and urges people to accept these women.

The story weaves together disparate ideas of home and records how in the wake of Partition, each of these conceptions and representations privileged patriarchal paradigms due to which abducted women found themselves at the fringes of socio-political and cultural existence. The story records how Partition eroded the traditional value of home and delineates the process through which a woman is virtually rendered a stranger within her own home. Bedi's story foregrounds the implications of this historic event by mapping the trajectory of the relationship of a young couple amidst political turmoil, mayhem and violence. Before Partition, Lajo, described as the "gay and slim girl of the village—the daughter of the soil" falls in love and marries Sunder Lal (179). Though Sunder Lal proves to be a dominating and abusive husband, thrashing her on the flimsiest pretexts, Lajo's world revolves around him

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and the story effectively establishes how Lajo is content despite being enmeshed in an intrinsically patriarchal household and society where it was important for a man to know how to "control a chit of a woman" (179).

Anthony Smith, in one of his works on nationalism, identifies the family as central to the creation of a nation, which he refers to as the "superfamily" where "the family of the nation overrides and replaces the individual's family". According to him "the metaphor of family is indispensible to nationalism". Thus, it is extremely symbolic that Sunder Lal is shown to be a nationalist in the story. Though very remorseful at his cruel treatment of her and swearing that once recovered he would "enshrine her always in [his] heart", on her recovery, he is disconcerted to find that instead of a suffering and emaciated woman, he is faced with a "fresher", "brighter" "healthier" and almost "plump" Lajo draped in a dupatta "in a typical Muslim fashion" (186). However, in spite of his misgivings, he accepts Lajo, as seen in the light of Smith's postulations, her reinstatement into his home is crucial, for in Sunder Lal's imagination, the images of home and nation coalesce. One cannot exist without the other. His inability to accept Lajwanti as his very own Lajo and her subsequent anointment as "devi" closely aligns with the trope of nation-as-woman, where the woman's body becomes the body of the motherland violated by a marauding foreigner. Hence, in the manner of a soldier guarding a nation Sunder Lal stands as the sentinel of his "devi", "vigilant against it being lost again" (187). However, though he accepts her and promises to never beat her again it is only by alluding to her defilement as "sacrifice" and, as Priya Kumar points out, by "effacing the corporeality of Lajwanti's now-tainted body and reifying her into the figure of a pristine, untouchable goddess can Sunder Lal bring himself to reintegrate her into the protective fold of his home" (155). Thus, Sunder Lal's vision of home is exclusionary as Lajo's inclusion in his home is conditional, dependent as it is on her silence about the "dark days" and her acquiescence to her veneration as a "devi".

Conversely, for Lajo, home is an emotional construct that is synonymous with her husband and is defined by the peculiarities of their relationship. By privileging Lajo's subjectivity in the second half of the narrative, Bedi presents the intangibility of the idea of home and happiness. Hence, it is remarkably ironic that for Lajo, it is Sunder Lal's "unexpected kindness and fineness of behavior" that leads to the collapse of their relationship and her home (187). To Lajwanti, the term "devi" symbolizes the breakdown of her conjugal life and is a reminder of her violated past that explicitly highlights her state of impure womanhood. Consequently, the recurring slogan "[r]ehabilitate them in your hearts" emerges as extremely paradoxical. For, while Sunder Lal enshrines Lajo in his heart, her home is irrevocably lost to her. Though Sunder Lal wants her to forget her trauma, it is he who keeps the past alive between them. Their changed relationship marks the disintegration of Lajo's home. In the eyes of the world, Lajo is a singularly fortunate woman who, in spite of being "defiled" has been reclaimed by her husband. Extremely significant in exploring Lajo's conflict of identity, home and homelessness is Freud's concept of *unheimliche,* that is, the feeling of "unhomeliness" that is encountered by individuals in certain circumstances. Lajo is "unhomed" within her own home. As the text points out, Lajo "had got everything and yet she had lost everything—she was rehabilitated and was ruined" (189). Lajwanti's trauma is thus, peculiarly distinct. She is faced with the prospect of being severed from her own past in her own home. Though physically restored, emotionally she represents an

abandoned woman. She is at once “at home” and “homeless” and has been forced to live in exile in her own home.

As a counter foil to “Lajwanti”, is Jamila Hashmi’s short story “Banished”. Hashmi’s narrative is largely an interior monologue by the protagonist Bibi, a Muslim woman whose parents have been killed in Partition massacres and who, instead of returning to her natal family and home, chooses to remain with his Sikh abductor, Gurpal Singh. Like Lajwanti, this story too critiques the very idea of home as constructed by the patriarchal state. Oscillating between the past and the present, the story combines memory and myth to problematise the vision and meaning of home. The narrative is an intense evocation of the pain of a woman who has been “dishonourably dragged” from her home and nation to become the “wife” of Gurpal Singh, who on bringing her to his village in Sangraon, immediately tells his grandmother, “[h]ere, I have brought you a *bahu*. She is your maid. She will do whatever you tell her to do—grind grain, fetch water, anything you want” (89).

For the abducted women, Partition represented a very fundamental tearing up of the fabric of their lives, that is, the family which is central to the life of every woman, was lost to them. Henceforth, the protagonist’s consciousness oscillates between the past where she remembers her parents, their gruesome death, her brothers who never come to recover her, and her present where she is the ‘wife’ of Gurpal Singh, the ‘bahu’ of his Bari Ma and the mother of his three children. Bibi, thus, grapples with immeasurable and inexpressible sadness as she attempts to come to terms with her fractured existence. Caught between two homes and two nations, Bibi exists in a state of in-betweenness constantly seeking refuge in the memories of her natal home. Living in Sangraon, everything reminds her of her childhood and her erstwhile life. Memories of her loving relationship with her parents, especially her brother who goes to England and the celebration of festivals are brutally disrupted by images of death and destruction.

Nevertheless, the story records the process through which the protagonist, in spite of her extraordinary situation, gradually becomes an integral part of Gurpal’s life and home. From being a mere servant enduring domestic hardships, she wins the love of Bari Ma, who grows so fond of her that she calls her “Lakshmi” and gladly praises her to the skies in the presence of their neighbours. The protagonist herself acknowledges that the memories of her home and family have faded away with the birth of her daughter. As the text points out:

> The pear tree has blossomed every year since Munni was born. When the seasons change, its branches become filled with flowers, the tree bends over heavy with fruit, deepening its bond with the earth. Its roots burrow deeper into the soil. No one can rupture that bond (88).

Though she cringes whenever she hears the word “bahu”, realizing that her life and “marriage” with Gurpal is a sham and all through the years she incessantly dreams of the day when, if her brother comes to take her, would merely “smile at Bari Ma and without so much looking at Gurpal would just walk away” from them, yet, when soldiers come to recover her, she hides “just like the princess in the fairy tale”. Her refusal to return constitutes an act of resistance. Though faced with the prospect of being united with her brother, she nevertheless is flooded with doubts and questions: “Repatriate them to what country? Where? To whom? .... [and] who were

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these soldiers? And what country would that be like?" (102) Her questions are a challenge directed at the state—a state that had lost any claims it might have had to intervene in her life by its complete failure to prevent the brutality and displacement that accompanied Partition. Her refusal to return can also be read as an attempt to cling to the remnants of whatever constitutes her home now. Hashmi also highlights that Bibi and Gurpal's dependence on each other is mutual, as throughout the story it is clear that both Gurpal and his grandmother are scared of the past and both dread the recovery of the protagonist when they hear of the agreement between the two countries regarding exchanging abducted women. Bibi too, over the years had realized that her "dreamland had turned into dust and vanished" and even justifies her decision by believing that she was after all wedded to Gurpal Singh. As the text points out:

> Hadn't Gurpal rolled out a carpet of corpses for me? Painted the roads red with blood? Provided an illumination by burning down city after city? Didn't people celebrate my wedding as they stampeded, screaming and crying? It was a wedding, all right. Only the customs were new: celebration by fire, smoke, and blood (102).

Mridula Sarabhai, a social worker deeply involved in the process of recovering abducted women, believed that no woman could be happy with her abductor and said that, "for me recovery work is not a humanitarian problem, it is a part of my ideology". This story emerges as a counter discourse to all such arguments as it demonstrates how with the passage of time relationships alter and how this programme of recovery required much more than a political perspective. Nonetheless, Bibi's decision to continue living with Gurpal does not suggest a concrete resolution of her life. It does not suggest an erasure of her past life and home. Moreover, just as Lajwanti's inclusion in her own home demands her silence, Bibi's is also contingent upon her forgetting the past. Thus, the story records the ways in which both her abductor and the state endeavour to control her memory in order to control her identity. If Gurpal Singh wants her to forget her parental home, her family and also the very fact that she was abducted i.e. her life before Partition, then the state wants to erase the fact that she is a victim of rape and violence and the mother of his children i.e. the reality of her life after Partition.

Thus, in both the stories home emerges as a patriarchal construct where the man as the master of the house lays down the conditions for the participation and inclusion of women in the domestic space. This privileging of the patriarchal paradigms is further reiterated through the motif of the *Ramayana*. The ancient Indian epic, the *Ramayana*, particularly the story of Sita's abduction and her consequent banishment, figures prominently in both the stories. This is not surprising considering the fact that even political leaders of the day equated the abduction of women during Partition with the abduction of Sita and it was propagated that as "descendants of Ram" it was the duty of every Indian to bring back these women (Menon and Bhasin 68). Thus, the parallels between Sita's situation and the predicament of the abducted women are rather obvious. In referring to the *Ramayana* and the concept of *Ram Rajya,* the stories demonstrate how cultural memory is invoked to justify and legitimize the state's "recovery" and "restoration" operation that ultimately is rooted in notions of traditional male honour while at the same time the story of Sita's return and banishment is also used to envisage the fate of the recovered women. Interestingly, in "Lajwanti", the story of Sita's banishment is appropriated by the

religious/conservative as well as the nationalist/reformist strand. The priest Baba Narain Das considers the incident as a "proof of justice and morality" and is an invocation of patriarchal values where the words of a washerman carry more weight as against those of a queen. Conversely, for the reformist/nationalist Sunder Lal, Sita is a "victim of treachery and betrayal" and her rejection by Ram constitutes an "unjust" act. "Banished" too, is a reinvention and a subversion of the epic where the protagonist identifies herself with Sita, who rather than returning to her Ram chooses to go into and live in perennial exile with her "modern-day Ravana". Thus, unlike her counterpart in the epic, Bibi chooses survival over loneliness, rejection and death.

Consequently, home, as these stories demonstrate, emerges as a site of violence. The two stories capture the pervasive conflict where the protagonist is reduced to a divided being, which lives in one home but constantly dreams of another and in the process demonstrate how these women come to exist in what Homi Bhabha refers to as "the realm of the unhomed". As Bhabha explains:

> In a feverish stillness, the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasion. In that displacement, the border between home and the world becomes confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become a part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as dividing as it is disconcerting (445).

Finally, it can be said that "Lajwanti" and "Banished" underscore how the concept of "home" emerges as an ambiguous, ephemeral and a contested entity vis-à-vis the abducted/recovered women. In intimately delineating their travails, these stories critique the state's patriarchal and regimented notions of belonging and citizenship and, at the same time, lay bare the inherent futility and failure of the whole exercise of "recovery" and "restoration". The two stories articulate the fact that the conditions of "being at home" and "not being at home" does not simply imply physical presence or absence; rather, it is contingent upon the politics of inclusion and exclusion shaped by the existing socio-cultural and political realities. Therefore, these stories do not analyze the twin conditions of "home" and "exile" as geographical constructs but highlight the fragmentations that define these concepts in the face of historical developments. Thus, as these stories testify, for the abducted/recovered women, the idea of home is singularly fraught with complexities as it involved a blurring of boundaries between the conditions of "home", "homelessness" and "exile".

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