

Territorial Conceptualization: Woman and Nation in the Short Story of the Partition

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Abstract

In this paper, an analysis of the way 'woman' and 'nation' are defined as 'territories' has been attempted in more senses than one. It is important to note that the short story is the only genre, which has successfully captured the immediate trauma of Partition. Short stories written in Urdu by Saadat Hasan Manto, in Hindi written by Krishna Sobti, Bisham Sahni and Mohan Rakesh, in Punjabi by Rajinder Singh Bedi are all vignettes of the Partition holocaust. These stories provide an opportunity to study gender roles, both the accorded and the appropriated within a social system on the verge of total collapse.

Keywords: Territory; Gender; Trauma; Genre; Partition

'Woman' and 'Nation' form the two major thematic concepts in the Partition short stories written around 1947 and the following decade. Both are interlinked in more ways than one and defined as 'territories' in more than one sense too. 'Woman' can be 'conquered' like land or 'territory', can be 'captured' like a 'Nation', Nation is seen in 'gendered' terms, the identity of the woman and the Nation, intermingle and submerge within each other, 'nations' are seen in terms of territorial conceptualizations in the minds of characters of some of these stories and so are the women. My attempt in this essay is to foreground this particular aspect of Partition and analyze its representation in some of the best stories of this period, written in Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi.

It does not come as a surprise that the short story emerged as one of the important forms of Partition writings. There is an amazing variety of the story in the works of different writers. In the case of Manto, for example, we find the creation of a new genre, the really short story (of even a couple of sentences)¹ where the brevity of the story is taken as a framework to create the insanity of the cruelties human beings forced on one another.

In fact, Manto had to create a new framework to face the insanity of the Partition. Relationship dynamics were re-evaluated, human values were refreshed and a new psyche gave rise to 'Nai Kahani' (New Story) in Hindi and 'Naya Afsana' (New Tale) in Urdu around the same time i.e., 1956.

The first story that portrays this dichotomy of being in a particular 'nation' and yet have no allegiance to it and attaching oneself to the concept of the nation is Ashfaq Ahmad's [born 1925] 'Gadariya' (1955) [(Shepherd), Originally published in 'UjlePhool', later in *An Epic Unwritten: The Penguin Book of Partition stories from Urdu*, ed. and trans. Mohammad Umar Memon, New Delhi: Penguin 1998]. The community with its essence in tolerance is before us in the character of Dauji who knows a lot of Islam, has a sense of history and culture and all this make him closer with the Muslim identity while being a conscious Hindu. When the riots begin, his 'choti' (tuft of hair on the tonsure), which stands for his Hindu identity, is clipped and he is forced to read the 'kalma'. But all his knowledge of Islam cannot save the face of his own Hindu identity. The story ends with the powerful image of Dauji having been condemned to become a shepherd 'walking like a long-haired ghostly figure' behind the herd of goats. In spite of his 'conceptualization' of his 'nation' as an amalgam of Hindu and Muslim cultures, he is forced to

¹Saadat Hasan Manto, *Dastavez*, Vol.1-5 (New Delhi: RajkamalPrakashan, 1993).

confront the 'present' somewhere in his consciousness and his psyche has to perceive and accept the separating line between the Hindus and the Muslims.

'*Toba Tek Singh*' (1955) by Saadat Hasan Manto [1912-1955] actually takes off from the point where '*Gadariya*' finishes. It is a story about random limits and borders that divide the communities, histories and traditions. For the entire populations who suffered the trauma of leaving their homes and hearths India and Pakistan were merely visual spaces. The scenes outside the lunatic asylum project much more insanity than the inside. When one of the lunatics climbing high up a tree is asked to come down, he says, "I don't want to live in Hindustan or Pakistan. They mean nothing to me. I'm going to make my abode right here on this tree." [Manto 110]

'*Toba Tek Singh*' is also a story of displacement and banishment from one's past and rootedness. Home is where one's roots are, one's past; one's shared relationships, one's memories and the presence of one's ancestors, even if they are no longer alive. All this gives one a sense of identity. Even in their demented state, some lunatics have not lost their sense of place, which is manifested in the singular presence of Bishen Singh. The idea of lunacy becomes a metaphor for the madness prevailing around these prison inmates. Manto captures the pathos and dilemma of the prisoners in a way that is both a satire of the decisions by the two governments and a critique of the partition horrors.

Krishna Sobti's (woman writer born 1925 writes in Hindi) story '*Sikka Badal Gaya*' (1948) (Change of currency) was written in 1948 in Hindi and portrays the dilemma of the woman protagonist leaving behind the ancestral house, conceptualizing the idea of 'her being' 'her space' and 'her nation' in the symbol of the haveli, the ancestral house. The heroine Shahni wants to maintain the dignity of her Shahji's house by stepping out of the door respectfully and not in tears. The familial status and dignity of her ancestors was, she thought, in her custody. Having to migrate and leave this haveli meant a kind of betrayal of family trust bestowed upon her. From the 'house' into the refugee camp, she has to move—from the actual 'space' of her rootedness to the 'conceptual territory' of her nation, which is the refugee camp, Shahni's journey is one of a change of realms.

A story, which effectively portrays the territorial conceptualization of the 'nation' during post-partition years, is Mohan Rakesh's (Hindi playwright and short story writer) story '*Malbe ka Malik*' (Lord of the Rubble). The story depicts Gani Mian's visit to Amritsar seven and a half

years after the partition and the destiny that the family had met with during the Partition riots. Gani Mian's visit to Bazar Bansa recalls for him the most ferocious fire which had destroyed the place in 1947. The visibly destroyed house has come into the 'ownership' of Rakha.

The irony of the story is where the writer informs us that Rakha is the self-proclaimed owner of this 'malba' which till today, represents the house itself and he clings to it. In his mind, Rakha's 'conceptualized' ownership of his land and its representation in the form of the debris of the house is the kind of bitter irony, which is very common in Partition fiction.

Manto's '*Tetwal ka Kutta*'; (The Dog of Tetwal) is another story which depicts the contradiction of 'territorial' boundaries. The story is placed in an area called 'Tetwal', now in Pakistan. The soldiers on both the sides of India on the one side and Pakistan on the other live similarly, share the same Punjabi ethnicity, talk and behave identically. But they are obsessed with the ideas of difference in their thought process of 'us' and 'them', 'we' and the 'others', 'this side and 'that' side; 'Hindustan' and 'Pakistan'.

Manto finds this agenda of the 'conceptualization' of nations, a futile one. With the concept of citizenship in place, free movement from one country to another won't be easy. The 'territorial conceptualization' of nations is complete and its effects are visible in the binary perspectives that have emerged. The dog is a metaphor and symbolizes the conflicted psyche of all the people who faced similar dilemmas during Partition.

'*Thanda Gosht*' (1950) (Cold Meat) the story which Ahmad Nadeem Qasimi (Pen name of Ahmed Shah, born 1916, Urdu writer and editor) considered 'too hot' for *Nuqoosh*² portrays a human being as a beast. After murdering an entire Muslim family and lusting afterwards, Ishar Singh abducts a young woman of the murdered family. Realizing that he was going to have sex with a dead woman gives him a shock and makes him impotent. Violence is the theme of the story. Interestingly, for Manto, Ishar Singh's impotence is symbolic of his integrity which is still alive. Man is bestial but even in his worst moments he is human at a very basic level.

In the story '*Khol Do*', an old man asks some men posing as volunteers at a refugee camp in Pakistan to find his daughter Sakina, whom he has lost during the traumatic journey from

²Jason Francisco, 'In the heat of fratricide: The Literature of India's Partition burning freshly', *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No.11, 1996, pg.250.

India. When they find her, they gang rape her and then leave her. When she is brought to the examining doctor in the camp and the doctor says 'open it', (meaning the window), Sakina lying passive on the stretcher, opens her salwar almost obeying promptly. She has been traumatized to the extent that she responds to the command of 'Khol do' in one manner only. It emphasizes, as do all of Manto's stories, the fact that, 'the subject of the Partition was first the human being, not the Hindu human being, nor the Muslim, nor the Sikh. The experiences of each community distinctly mirror one another; indeed, they reach out to and clutch at one another. No crime, no despair, no grief in exile belongs uniquely to anyone.'³Both '*Thanda Gosht*' and '*Khol Do*' also highlight the fact that in times of violence and war, the female body like the land or property becomes a site of conquest and victory.

Whenever there is a fight over power and possession, the gender disparity, the double standards of society become visible. We see references to violence targeted against women in all literatures.

Partition was an event, which especially focuses on gender differences, double standards and attitudes. The short story written during this time brings out the trauma of the immediate loss of lives, liberties and property and the violence inherent in each of these.

In this context, the role accorded to women by the people, society and culture comes to the fore. They repeatedly become victims of human anger and all the records of partition especially oral narratives mention sexual violence or fear of it.

Rape, regarded as a manifestation of aggression against the victim, is also seen as an attempt to grind women and their men into submission. A patrilineal culture, like that of India is based on possessional rights. Possessional rights while making the male, the possessor, the owner categorize the female as the 'object' of 'possession' and an assault is essentially a challenge to these possessional rights which the male relations—father, brother, husband—have over her.³

Women were the worst sufferers in those days of crisis. Men lost their lives, and suffered physical destruction of property and goods and dislocation. For them, it was a physical, psychological and material loss. But except for their lives, their losses were not something they

³A definite relation between the patriarchal system and violence against women is traced by Madhu Kumari in '*Patriarchy and Violence against women in India*'; *Women and Violence, Seminar* (New Delhi, 1994) p.142-63

could not replace with the passage of time. But the woman's invasion of her body, self-respect and confidence all perennially attached with sexual 'purity' could not be recovered. The short stories dealing with the post-partition days revive the mental trauma, and torture that they had to live through. In all these, the most prominent are 'Exile' by Jamila Hashmi (Muslim woman writer, 1929-1988), *Lajwanti* by Rajinder Singh Bedi (Indian short story writer, 1915-1984, wrote in Punjabi) and 'A Leaf in the Storm' by Lalithambika Antharjanam (Indian woman writer, 1909-1987, wrote in Malayalam),

But in all these stories we find a complete objectification of the female. Whether she is something to be captured, protected, looted, violated or even rescued, she is always portrayed as an 'object', the 'other'. In these stories, one doesn't find many choices being offered to the female. In all the three stories— 'Exile', 'Lajwanti' and 'A Leaf in the Storm' —the women are raped and abducted during the Partition.

Jamila Hashmi's 'Exile'(1969) (From her collection 'Aap-Beeti Jag-Beeti) is an autobiographical story of abduction, rape and marriage against the wishes of the woman narrator. To focus on the significance of the situation, the woman tells Sita's story of abduction, her trauma in the jungle after she is abandoned by her husband and her consequent suffering that follows in the Hindu epic. The woman was abducted and brought home as a 'bahu' (Daughter-in-Law). She was "dragged to Sangraon" (pg.63) after having witnessed the dead bodies of her family members. She becomes aware that her home is destroyed, her family has been killed, she is compulsively made to marry her abductor. The trauma is not over though:

- No one had greeted me at the door of the house with a handful of rice and corn; or anointed my dust-covered hair with oil; or adorned me with jewels and fine clothes or put mehendi on my hands and sindoor in the parting of my hair. But I had become a bride. (pg.52)

Lalithambika Antharjanam's 'A Leaf in the Storm'(1948) is one of those rare stories, which has for its protagonist, a young girl who had been involved in the freedom struggle. Her protagonist Jyotirmoyi Devpal has had a perfect childhood. She has studied till college and has caught the patriotic and nationalist passion. Travelling with fourteen other women her Muslim friends hide her in a bullock cart with bundles of hay. But the women are caught

hiding by the marauders. The discovery causes “loud, thunderous laughter. Wild shouts.” (Pg.169)

The woman in Rajinder Singh Bedi’s *Lajwanti*(1956) (taken from his collection of the same name) goes through something similar. The story deals with the precarious realities of women who were victims of the ferocity and savagery of the marauders. It is an emotional account of the women who have to take the burden of their sufferings beyond history which has lost its sense of time. Ironically, the title and the name ‘*Lajwanti*’ is drawn from a Punjabi folk song—“Do not touch Lajwanti/for she will curl up/ and die.” (pg.68) which is repeated in the story like a refrain. She suffers because she is a delicate property and is controlled by the enemy and also because she represents an object without an identity of her own as an individual.

For women, limited by the traditional patriarchal structure at home and the community, the conflict continues relentlessly:

The sexual temperament, role and status are clearly marked—aggression, force and efficacy in the male and passivity, ignorance, docility, virtue and ineffectuality in the female.⁴

Jamila Hashmi’s heroine is responsible for selflessly doing grueling work for her family and taking care of her children as she has to have the strength to take her daughter away from the traumatic past she has witnessed.

- The story comprises of two arcs. The past with the woman’s childhood, in which she has vague memories of her family, mostly her brothers who departed for England and didn’t come back to save her. The other time zone is the present where she has three children and is constantly tortured and beaten by Gurpal’s mother. Her children mitigate her loneliness and suffering to a certain extent:
- The pear tree has blossomed every year since Munni was born. When the season changes, its branches become filled with flowers, the tree bends over heavy with fruit,

⁴Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*; (London: Routledge, 1970).

deepening its bond with the earth. Its roots burrow deeper into the soil. No one can rupture that bond. (88)

- She says about her daughter “Munni stands in my way. She is the great distance that separates me from my own family” (95)

Lajwanti’s tale reiterates the story of a woman being portrayed as a ‘devi’ (Goddess). A nation and a community believing in female purity are not able to accept this tarnishing of women. Women are exchanged in order to maintain the status quo. But the recovery is not a simple process. Men are unable to take back these women with a checkered past. Rajinder Singh Bedi highlights the painful ritual of exchange at the Wagah border (International border between India and Pakistan) where husbands refuse to take back the women irrespective of how much they plead. Religion, an agency which encourages such killings, is against the acceptance of these women. Patronized by them and scared of the social norms, people refused to take back their own daughters and wives. Bedi’s stand is very clear:

- Little did they understand the courage of their women, the awesome strength with which they had faced death, but had chosen to carry on living in such a world—a world in which even their husbands refused to acknowledge them. (Pg.72)

Conditioned and brought up in this patriarchal setup, Sunderlal, even though he intends to, cannot have normalcy in his marital relations. He goes to the other extreme and treats her as a ‘Devi’. Sunder Lal is oblivious sad tale and doesn’t want to be a part of the sufferings she had gone through. Her abduction and rape have been a very high price that he has paid and his male ego is shattered. He notices that “her complexion looked clearer, her eyes brighter and she had put on weight” (pg.79) It is only the morality and principles that he has been advocating that stop him from leaving her.

She faces her ultimate reality that “she would never be Lajo again. She had returned home, but had lost everything. Sunderlal had neither the eyes to see her tears nor the ears to hear her sobs.” (Pg.82)

While the heroines in Hashmi’s *‘Exile’* and Bedi’s *‘Lajwanti’* are caught up in the dilemma and remain passive in a situation which has no options, the heroine in Antharjanam’s *‘A Leaf in the Storm’* gets into a space where she is compelled to make a choice. But conditioned into

subservience by society her decision is in following normative gender role prescriptions of the society she belongs to.

Jyoti takes the right decision at this point to keep the child irrespective of all adversities. The innocent infant and the sound of its voice like “the assertion of a right, an appeal to nature” (pg.170) bring out her affection and she decides to undertake her responsibility.

In Jyoti’s character, we can see a changed person, someone moving towards an independent existence and the woman making a choice.

Mozel, the heroine of Manto’s short story of the same name is a woman character from a community which is an outsider in this conflict-ridden space. As a westernized, bohemian Jew, living in Bombay at the time of Partition, she is critically distanced from the warring zone of Hindu-Muslim riots. She makes fun of Tirlochan’s pretentious respect for Sikh religious groups, especially in this dangerous scenario, when they try to save his fiancée from a Muslim entrapment site. Mozel is aggressive and defiant and refuses to be dominated by any man, and all her relationships are temporary because she rejects all gender prescriptive roles of a wife, mother or sister. She is a woman without ‘boundaries’ and is the symbol of a ‘free’ human being, a woman not defined by ‘territorial’ markers, but partition swallows her.

In the words of Bodh Prakash:

Strategies of resistance to patriarchal exploitation vary, depending upon individual contexts. And not all women put up resistance. However, those who do, begin a journey towards a self-definition that attempts to shed generations of patriarchal orientation. They become aware of their own selves as women and as victims. The exercise of their agency results in the creation of a new female self.⁵

The Partition transformed the idea of home for a whole generation of people. People who had never been out of their village homes for generations were forced to change to a different place overnight, and this also transformed for them the idea of a nation. Nationhood became a living thinking concept.

⁵Bodh Prakash, ‘*The Woman Protagonist in Partition literature*’, Ravikant & Tarun Saint eds. *Translating Partition*, (New Delhi: Katha, 2001) p.206.

There was a whole other voice of the writers of the East, who also wrote about this tragedy of conflict, discord and displacement in the 1940's. The 1947 partition was seen as a national conflict when millions of people traversed the boundaries of one nation to step into another only to find themselves in refugee camps.

However, the Bengal partition was totally different. It did not begin with a transitional displacement. The whole time, generations of population moved at their own pace and took several years to actually do this. There are some valid reasons behind this. East Bengal was going from bad to worse economically; and economy was bad with spiraling prices which led to movement of the people. Often, there were petty communal conflicts between the two rival communities and the Hindus could no longer trust anyone in East Pakistan and believe it to be their home. The Noakhali riots in 1946 and other communal disturbances of 1950 resulted in a whole lot of refugees. In the first year after Partition 1.25 million people had crossed over to West Bengal, Assam and Tripura. In the half century after Independence, the number has reached five million.⁶

When we think of the two Partitions of the west and the east and the contrasting but definite hold they have in our respective subjective memories, it is quite shocking to find that 'accounts of partition have tended to be Punjab-centered and Bengal has not received the attention it deserves.'⁷ However, recent publications⁸ have tried to rectify this and addressed this issue about the Bengal partition. These authors of short stories (translated into English) are from Bangladesh and India and their stories problematize some idea of the range of narrative available in Bangla. These writers are busy exploring some of the significant themes related to the partition—the porous and vulnerable borders the self-sustaining population and also the blurred visions of memory. At the same time, these stories unsettle the concept of patriotism that focuses on the creation of the two nations and that is defined by physical borders. The stories also bring in an uneasy feeling about the way this creation was more about dislocation than any kind of resolution.

⁶The debate over Joya Chatterji, 'Right or Charity? Relief and rehabilitation in West Bengal 1947-50', Suvir Kaul ed. *The Partition of Memory*; (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001) p.7.

⁷Tai Yong Tan & Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*; (London: Routledge, 2000) p.141.

⁸Debjani Sengupta ed. *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from the Two Bengals* (New Delhi: Srishti, 2003).

On the other side, in Bengal, the narrative of the two opposing groups was also a fact of language (Urdu was spoken only by the elite Muslims who never fully amalgamated with the common people who spoke Bangla and were economically and culturally disparate from them). The proximity of 'epar' Bangla and 'opar' Bangla (of 'this' Bengal and 'that') was visible in the rivers, the language, traditions and culture and the self-esteem of the Bengalis, whether Hindus or Muslims, took all these into account rather than religion.

Therefore, in Bangla literature, Partition is seen in humanistic terms— the trauma and the pain are more in the mind and the soul rather than the physical body. Bangla stories are nostalgic and travel back in time. Consequently, stories from the two Bengals are less gruesome, less about the physical pain than the stories from the West. Another major difference between the fiction of the East and the West is to do with the time zones. Many of the stories from Bengal treat Partition as something present, contemporary and very real. For many, Partition didn't get over with 1947, but travelled in time and is a continuous memory they live and experience every day. The lives of the refugees are a constant reminder of the Partition.

The Bangla stories that are mentioned here are set in the years 1946-48, when families lost their homes, made arduous journeys through rough terrains and survived miraculously, with no food and no sustenance, only to reach their final destination in refugee camps. The Sealdah station in Calcutta transformed into a home for scores of people coming from East Bengal and the vulnerable state of their lives. Their plight is beautifully captured in the stories by Pratibha Basu and Manik Bandhopadhyay for instance '*Dukulhara*' (*Flotsam and Jetsam*) and *The Final Solution* respectively. The mutual exchange of estates and houses is portrayed in Dibyendu Palit's story. A few narratives are emotional portrayals of the uprooted human beings and of harrowing accounts of ordinary people to survive for instance Selina Hossain's '*Gayatri-Sandhya*' [*An Evening of Prayer*] and Ateen Bandhopadhyay's '*Kafer*' [*The Infidel*]. Syed Waliullah's story is a powerful narrative of simple men and women who are confronted with the harsh reality in which they find themselves.

When we examine the Partition from a feminist perspective, we see that there exists a deep nexus between the community at one end and the nation on the other. Moral regimentation or rather a hypocritical obsession with women's sexual chastity marks the patriarchal basis of the so-called superior class in India. A woman's body is at stake even in the times of nation

building. Rape of the community honor through the invasion and violation of female sexuality is a narrative that resonates through this process of creating a 'free' nation. The women who are raped and abducted are suffering from a dual oppression by patriarchy: first by the men of one community who marks his own 'identity' by imposing his territoriality over her body, second by her 'own' community which involves her exclusion and abandonment from her home and marriage. (Chatterji, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial History* 1994))

Partha Chatterji continues in his book *The Nation and its Fragments*⁹ "community' and 'women' are presented as two fragments of the Nation. At the moment of the birth of two nation-states in the place of one colonial state, the bodies of countless women are brought under the control of their respective communities to complete the grand act of vivisection."¹⁰

Conclusions

Thus, what we see in these short stories of Partition is the way the 'nation' and its 'women' have been conceptualized in territorial terms. Both are seen, analyzed and slotted similarly in 'territorial' terms, undermining their powers of opposition and arousing strong feelings against such patronizing attitudes, stemming from patriarchal structures and communalistic ideology. Partition identified 'the nation' and 'the woman' as conceptualized territories—to be conquered, inscribed and exploited and nowhere is this more evident than in the stories of the time.

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⁹Partha Chatterji, *The Nation and its fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial histories*; (Delhi: OUP, 1994) p.136.

¹⁰Partha Chatterji, *The Nation and its fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial histories* (Delhi: OUP, 1994) p. 137.

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