

LEGITIMISING VIOLENCE IN THE NAME OF HONOUR: WOMEN AND THE PARTITION OF INDIA

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Abstract

*The most turbulent time in the Indian history so far has been the Partition of India when homes and relationships were lost with the horrendous violence that came along it. The irony of the period is marked by the fact that we all remember genocidal violence but little have we paid heed to the gendered violence. The degree of horror and violence perpetrated on the victims of the Partition, especially women, is unimaginable. It was a politics of the body. It is with this notion that the Paper aims to analyze the Indo-Canadian novelist, Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999) to foreground the role of patriarchal representations of a woman's body as a trope of honour. The ideology of the honour of a nation, community and family attached with the fairer/ weaker sex ultimately makes the woman a site for contestation and dissection of her body during the time of strife and conflict. The aim, therefore, is to examine how Baldwin explicitly alters the role of victim and perpetrator in a seemingly routine narration of violence against women by their kith and kin and the communal mob, using the tool of restructuring of the consciousness.*

Keywords: gender, honour, Partition, consciousness, body

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Violence, the word which links terror, brutality images to itself has always been imagined in the concept of 'Other'. Though, such description and definition of violence is not adequate and incomplete and goes beyond the notion well thought and practiced over the years. Interpersonal violence is visible by an apparent injury or harm to another but psychological violence and violence towards oneself are latent forms of the act. How does one can then tap or distinguish the latter acts of violence in comparison to what one sees as regular expression of the frustration or wrath? That is a vexed question and cuts to the heart of everyday demonstration of violence. The paper is an attempt to tease out this and other similar questions and understand that far from the popular understanding of violence as a unified concept, it has many dimensions and facets to it. During the time of conflict and the greatest holocausts the world has seen so far, violence has been a remarkable characteristic all the time in each one of them. Another uniformity in such events is also the killing of women who are generally non-participating lot in the frenzied killing acts. In the primitive years, when warfare started, women would be captivated in exchange of number of soldiers killed of the victorious army. The thought was to balance the number of lives lost as they were the "producers" of children. With debatable views it is believed that this marked the start of women being raped and seen as a sign of victory over Other during the time of turmoil.

During the Partition of India, the violence perpetrated caused and spread the agony to everyone in the same way. However, for women it moulded into different nature of violence and 'highlights not only their particular vulnerability at such times, but an overarching patriarchal consensus that emerges on how to dispose of the troublesome question of women's sexuality.' (Menon 20). It is not just the exchange of violence but strange character of it, in which bodies were mutilated, castrated, disfigured, and branded, with the signs of crescent and trident, which is questionable and symbolic of human pathology. The cultural memory of a particular time is

passed from one generation to another and acts repository of unconscious images which spur in the form of renewed violence in the turbulent time. It is unsurprising then that in all kinds of war known in the history the image of women has always been of one who could be attacked by Other and thus purity of religion would be profaned. She becomes the only carrier of religious sanctity, purity and to preserve the ideology. She either chooses to die or be killed, sometimes by her own kinsmen. This violence on the name of the honour goes unnoticed in the everyday experience of women. Continuous practices, code of conduct and the milieu around suggest that honour is an idea that is related to women only and specially to her sexuality. Impressed on their mind from a very young age they do not have audacity to see themselves differently. They do not set out to carve out a different identity for themselves. When Shauna Singh Baldwin speaks Roop's mind in *What the Body Remembers* 'It is a dread Roop shares with other girls in Pari Darvaza...fear of her own body, that lurer of lust from the eyes of the unrelated men' (135), it was evident that Roop had this thought deep imbedded that her body is a culprit for the fault of men so she must cover it. To guard her bodily honour is a part of her identity and a question of pride for men. Separating a woman with the honour which is specifically related to her sexuality and a symbolic of 'manhood' becomes a matter of contest between communities. She is like a site or land where whoever digs the flag of victory---branding the breasts and genitalia with religious symbols and triumphal slogans on women's body in the Partition of India--has defeated the Other. Can there be any justification for such brutality and savagery? Women were objectified on the name of honour and more so for the honour of male.

In every instance of the range of sexual violence, the assailant could not look at women in any other way. Knifing open Kusum's womb in the story, even when Bachan Singh had already killed her to prevent the dilution of 'religion' and to protect her 'chastity' is a symbol of appropriation of women's body not only by her own men but by the Other too. It was a challenge to Other by an appalling portrayal of power, 'I took your pawn. Your move.' (Baldwin 576) The question that erupts in our mind thus is that how when a woman is being raped, it is always she who carried the onus of polluting religion. The act involves two people but the man goes guilt-free. It can be answered in one way that a woman is the nurturer and biological producer of the family. Occupying the territory of her womb is close to the threat to the existence of other community. It makes her sacred and pious like religion which is upheld in high regards and cannot be humiliated. What we forget here, she is alive and breathing and has feelings and

emotions running through her being. Giving her body a symbolic value of community's, religion's and men's honour is in strict sense inhuman code of conduct and strangulating. Sometimes, it is argued that transgression of women because of forcible conversion and marriage is no less than death. It is preferable and prescribed by families, thus, to kill their kinswomen rather than giving them the choice to live. Bachan Singh's plea to Kusum to sacrifice her life because she was his responsibility and of 'childbearing age' and the seeds of foreign religion could have been planted in her womb, speaks of the fear that a man has for a woman's body. Of all the women in the household, Kusum was the only one whose sexuality needed to be protected. The idea of honour, again, could be desecrated if Other touched Kusum since Gujri was a widow and Revati bhua was in her late ages and had never married. Men take charge to decide in what measure do women as per their nurturing capacity carry the risk to damage the honour of the family. Everytime speaking on the behalf of her and for her even during the peace time, men place themselves on a position where they are seen as benevolent protectors of her. Worse is, when women also start believing that their existence and identity is not autonomous but entwined and closely linked with men and their decisions should always echo with their men folk. It doesn't look strange when the outbreak of violence on mass level reveals the masses in an extraordinary way. The continuum of violence is a language of everyday though with variations.

The choice to think and act in some other way was not presented to many, perpetrator and agent both. On the surface it looked, everyone was a willful person who had the reins of brain in their hands and exercised their power to choose. Although, we cannot deny that during violence, rage is the only passion and other virtues are lost. But hope, compassion, survival and struggle have very strong connotation for an individual and give the strength to fight and resist in adverse times. However, for women their position and postures are finely drawn through cultural memory which passes from one time to another and evolves to greater level but seldom in their favour. It becomes impossible for society and for her to conceive her in some other image. The immolation of Rajput women of themselves when their husband left for war or died in it or Sati custom, both during primitive time, have invariably formed the conscience and fits women in a frame in which if they die such deaths, it is glorious and supreme act of 'heroism'. In the Partition of India, women who killed themselves or their daughters or helped other women to die an honourable death have been classified in the same category. The act of 'suicide' in normal times becomes an act of 'valour'. The violence of such memories is so subtle and profound that it

becomes hard to grasp that whether the response towards women in war time a product of the situations occurred then or because of the deep seated notions that we have gathered by looking around us everyday or a result of memory that brings the same that we had seen before. In the novel, when Gujri tells Roop that stories are not told for the telling but for the teaching, she was a forbearer of the cultural memory that long been preserved, nurtured and believed on and now planted in the young mind. This psychological factor comes into play during conflict as the actors who participate in it as victims or agents- already know their role through unconscious images. Their behaviour, thoughts, actions, denial or assent have long been formed and the expression has just been acquired. There have been women warriors in the past, although very slight, who gave a very tough time to their oppressors and participated equally in the combat. But they are not the archetype of women we see around. Images of meek, demure, passive, submissive females are what we come across daily. How can then one act any different or can be imagined in some other way than the cultivated memory and image from the time of particular historical moment and communal conflict.

In Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure Narrative and Cinema", in which she coined the term 'Male Gaze', she clearly stated that 'women were the bearer of the meaning and not the maker of the meaning. When a woman is gazed by the gazer, there is an asymmetrical play of power. Where looking is considered as an active male role and is related to 'phallogentrism; whereas, being looked at is a passive act acquired by female subconsciously and such objectification is welcomed by them and relate to 'exhibitionism'

It can validate the reasons behind why men appear and play whereas women just act. Men not only act on the behalf of the community. Their individual identity acquires a broader perspective and pushes their territory beyond the everyday norm. Fabric of family assumes a wider role and gets replaced by community which is a new marker of identity that should be protected. Consider this, during the times of peace, the family as a smaller unit assigns the boundaries of honour and guards it ardently, even from the neighbours who are of the same religion and ethnicity. Ironically, during the time of war and conflict this shift of faith alters dramatically and now it is just Other who possesses the threat to 'honour' of the community. Can honour then not be called only an *idea*! It changes, gets defined in myriad ways and is so fragile as the meaning it exhibits. Everytime it is the gazer who is propounding its meaning and exerts

power simultaneously. In political and social contexts whatever is considered 'natural' is determined by how the things are being looked at or situations analysed in conjugation with the social ideology. Honour is a part of such discourse where beliefs are consciously engaged with the role prescribed to women. Such gender politics relegate women to inferior position and thus violence against them on the name of honour becomes a normal part of the language of strife and an attempt to save the religion, community and nation. The interplay and interchange of the role of agent and victim, in the Partition riots, becomes blurred to the eyes and often ambiguous. The story narrated by Bachan Singh of Kusum's death/sacrifice in *What the Body Remembers* has the marks of this two-fold irony. Men narrated how their kinswomen helped them in facing less misery when they had to take the tough decision to *martyr* them by helping voluntarily in removing their *chunni* and subsequently keeping their back at them. Women are shrouded in silence and pass on as agents of their will and the family members doing their women folk to death gets the pity and become victim. Those who died have always been spoken *for*, and our remembering of them in rituals, books and oral narration are struggling to decipher the meaning of their silence. Whether, women had autonomy, a free-will and capacity to have a control over their own bodies and lives, in the wide range forms of violence in the riots of Partition of India need more probing and penetrating deep in the coded meaning of silence.

Giving violence a legality, an assent and only solution than forging new ways and finding other possibilities, when hit by pressing situations is destructive. It not only binds identity of both the genders but present them as mere carrier and saviour of honour. Carrying a culture of such gravity which demands violence is a threat to peace. Literature is a medium to enlighten and shake our conscience on this natural seeming act and make us better person who can participate in the peace making process which though has many other dimensions to it.

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