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**Women's Chastity – Men's Honour.
Violence Against Women
in the Partition Hindi and Panjabi Short Story**

Abstract

Reports and memories of turmoil accompanying the 1947 Partition of British India into India and Pakistan abound in numerous descriptions of multiform violence against women. Most Hindi and Panjabi Partition short stories are also rich in descriptions of individual acts of violence against women as well as of an organised institutional process of violence carried out in the name of the law. When analysing the themes occurring in both Hindi and Panjabi short stories, one notices the absence of taboo subjects such as the killing of women by their own family, the future of recovered women or forced abortions and the forced giving up of children. These characteristic omissions in literature added to the silence of the women, caused partially by the traditional moral norms of the patriarchal community, also bring forward the question of the sense of guilt and co-responsibility of Panjabi males.

Both verbal reports and published memories of victims and witnesses of the tragic events accompanying the 1947 Partition of British India into India and Pakistan abound in numerous descriptions of multiform violence against women. The chopping off breasts, the cutting out, burning or tattooing of slogans or inscriptions commemorating shame and humiliation on women's hands, foreheads and bosoms, the cutting open of the bellies of pregnant women, rapes (often done in front of women's menfolk and children) – these were the most common examples of sexual violence prevailing at that time. Women were victims of abduction, objects of trade, subjects to forced conversions and marriages, and – later – also to involuntary repatriation, when often, after many years, against their will they were forced to abandon not only their husbands, but also their children.

Rape has always accompanied wars, pogroms and turmoils in times of social crisis. It is an expression of both strength and revenge at the same time. Transgressing and breaking the sexual taboo of the enemy, it constitutes a symbolic act of occupying his territory,

being thus an extremely effective method of subjugating enemy men by humiliation and “psychic castration” by proving their inability to protect their (i.e. belonging to their families) women.¹ In a patriarchal clan Panjabi community, where the taboo connected to woman’s sexuality is the main element of *izzat* (i.e. the notion of honour and shame in the system of social values), rapes, abductions and trade in women made a perfect weapon in the fight against the enemy.

Memories of the traumatic experiences of women can be found in different forms in most Hindi and Panjabi Partition short stories. Among them are both short, and curt notes simply listing the cruel acts against women among all the other atrocities, as well as complex, detailed descriptions of violence, usually presenting single acts and constituting the main theme of the work.

Most of such Hindi short stories from the late 1940s and early 1950s follow the same pattern: a few sentences enumerating the many and varied forms of violence against women make for an introduction to the main theme of a story or create a background for other events presented in more detail. Let us illustrate this by quoting such a typical introduction from *Light in Darkness* (*Andhakār mẽ prakāś*) by Girīścaṇḍr Asthānā:

Soldiers escort the remaining Hindus, tightly packed in trucks, to resettlement camps. Rich and poor are equally hungry, feel the same longing for a morsel of food. There are among them mothers with puffy eyes that have no more tears. One of them looked on as her only son was done in, humiliated like a dog, another saw the same happen to her husband, yet another saw her daughter being raped. (Asthanā 1947: 223)

The multitude of these fragments, recollecting and describing (sometimes in a very detailed fashion) atrocities of all kinds, was clearly a conscious and premeditated literary device, aiming to convey the atmosphere of horror and danger accompanying the Partition. However, this technique of shocking the reader with countless drastic scenes often deteriorated into a futile celebration of horror, which can be described as “pornography of violence”.² Let us look at another fragment of the same short story:

A woman, eight months pregnant, begged for mercy, kneeling and pointing to her belly: I'm expecting a baby. Have mercy on it, and I will remain forever grateful.
But a man was not a man then, he changed into an animal – a bloodthirsty, savage beast. He laughed evilly and with a mighty blow of an axe...!
A dreadful cry and it was over. (Asthanā 1947: 224)

¹ For a detailed description of rape as a ritual of victory in the Indian context, see Agarwal 1996: 29-57.

² Alok Rai formulated a similar thesis regarding the early Hindi Partition stories in his article, analysing works published in the first post-war volumes of the Hindi literary magazine *Hamis*. He described it actually as “pornography of violence”, though his choice of a story to illustrate this thesis is the most unfortunate or quite controversial to say the least. According to Rai, such a “pornographic” text, gloating over detailed violence for no good artistic reason, is *How many Pakistans?* (*Kitne Pakistan?*) by Kamleśvar. (Rai 1987: 321)

Such short descriptions of bestiality or laconic notes enumerating various kinds of it are extremely rare in the short stories of Panjabi writers. A very notable exception is Kartār S. Duggal's *Dark Night, Screams and Guards* (*Hanerī rāt, cikkar te caukīdār*), built entirely out of short, one- or two-sentence long reports. The voices of many anonymous women, curtly referring to what has happened to them, constitute a record of the fate of an average Panjabi woman – Hindu, Muslim or Sikh – during the Partition:

Seeing as they set fire to our home, we were thankful to the fate that we would die in flames; but my thirteen-day-old daughter started crying and they pulled us out of our hiding place under the wood. (...)

The girls defaced themselves, smearing their faces with soot, dust and mud. They caught me too, but I didn't seem attractive, so they let me go. (...)

I ran to the river, but because of the child I could not manage to kill myself. (...)

I asked my brother-in-law: Six years have passed since the death of your brother. Six years I honour his memory. Save his honour, kill us – mother and daughter. He chopped down the child, but not me – which was my undoing. (...)

I lamed my twelve-year-old daughter to save her from dishonour. (...)

When a girl prettier than others was found, all of them were over her. The more she lamented, the more they laughed. Where was God then? (...)

With great difficulty I pulled on the salwar of my dead mother and covered the breasts of my auntie. (...) (Duggal 1958: 78-84)

As it has already been mentioned, most of the short stories which shock readers with brutality of descriptions were written during the Partition or shortly afterwards – as an immediate, spontaneous and highly emotional³ reaction to the news of pogroms and atrocities in Panjab. The majority of texts were thus devoid of any reflection; they attempted only to record the unimaginable, hard to comprehend and convey, enormity of the atrocities. It is noteworthy that most of the acts described in these short stories were in fact cases of public violence, aimed at shaming not only individual women and their families, but – by using them – also the entire community of which they were part. Therefore it was also a sort of ritual of public torture, used as a tool of political warfare.

It took some time for such stories to appear in which the rapes and abductions of women became the main themes, such as Amṛtṛāy's *Gamut of Suffering* (*Vyathā kā sargam*) or Kartār S. Duggal's *Kulsum*.

In a society in which woman's chastity and impeccability of reputation is so closely connected with the honour of the clan and the entire community, rape meant the final

³ These stories are rich in phrases that end abruptly and in clauses ending in suspension points, question mark or exclamation mark. Cf. e.g. *Andhakār mē prakāś*.

social death, excluding the woman forever from her family and community. For the women who were accustomed to viewing themselves and the world through the eyes of others (especially of their menfolk), who were brought up to be docile beings without a right to their own individual identity, being accepted by the society was the only source of a feeling of their own value. The loss of chastity not only forever deprived them of that feeling, but as it meant shame for the entire clan, it irrevocably brought anathema. A physical but honourable death of their own doing (or by the action of their relatives) was a preferable alternative. Choosing between life in shame or an honourable death could be described following H. Krall's words as "the last chance of maintaining dignity" (Krall 1997: 66), if the actual choice existed and was really free. In fact, the decisions were either made by women's fathers, husbands and brothers or made under duress of social expectations; therefore these acts can hardly be considered spontaneous suicides or willing sacrifices.

Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin spent over 10 years collecting the official data and information on the fates of women in 1947, conducting dozens of conversations and interviews and noting down the reports of those who lived and agreed to talk about their past. The researchers present a healthy scepticism towards the thesis that there was an actual possibility of making a choice in the environment that enforced specific behaviour: "The circumstances in which many women took their own lives can hardly be said to have offered them much choice in the matter. When vials of poison or kirpans are handed to you; or quilts piled up, doused with kerosene and ignited so that you can jump into fire; or wells and rivers pointed out so that you can drown in them, can there be anything 'voluntary' about such a death?" (Menon, Bhasin 1998: 45-46)

However, this is exactly the way in which authors writing in Panjabi portray the behaviour of these women – as a conscious and made of one's own will decision to sacrifice one's life in defense of one's honour. Some – as Locan S. Baḥśī in his short story *Dust of Your Feet...* (*Dhūr tere carnāṁ dī...*) – praise women's chastity and innocence, courage and determination, and give their sacrifice the power of sanctity that changes ordinary water into the elixir of gods – amrita:

Pala Singh remembered many women who, during the Partition, defending their chastity and faith jumped to their death into wells (...).

– No! This water has no poison! – shouted Pala Singh. – This is amrita, water blessed by the life-sacrifice of virtuous women! (Baḥśī 1979: 62)

Others, among them Kartār S. Duggal, can but mourn for the women, recollecting their uncommon beauty, subtlety and strength of spirit:

Where are the girls of the village? Where are the local maidens, hidden behind seven veils? Where are the fair ladies, that even the slightest touch made impure? Where are the women of Pothohar, the fame of whom reached Balkh and Bukhara? (...)

Where are the queens that had it in them to kill their own children? Even now their hands must be covered in blood as if with henna (...).

Where, oh where are they, the goldenfaced nymphs?

Low. Lower. At the very bottom. Behind the gurudwara. In the garden, behind the citrus trees. A wide brick wall around the well. The coldest of colds, the sweetest of sweets. They are in there all – 79 women of Pothohar that will never grow old – youngsters, mothers, daughters and sisters, neighbours and friends. (Duggal 1995a: 18)

Though we find only four Hindi short stories with these themes (Vidyā, *The Sacrifice* (*Balidān*); Prāṇ, *The Murder of a Sister* (*Bahan kā qātil*); Udayśaṅkār Bhaṭṭ, *Darkness and Light* (*Andhakār aur prakāś*); Devrāj Dineś, ???), they too glorify the voluntary sacrifice of life by women as an act of supreme heroism in defence of their chastity and the honour of their entire clan. They emphasise the impeccable character of the women, their religiousness, spontaneity and total lack of hesitation.

More often in Hindi short stories we find heroines who are victims of rape and, not being able to cope with life in shame, not being able to set themselves free of the feeling of guilt, shame and relentless memories, choose death – such as Banno from *Vyathā kā sargam* – or who think about it unceasingly – such as the protagonist of Vṛndāvanlāl Varmā's story *Toṣī*.

Hindi authors differ from those writing in Panjabi also in their portrayal of the behaviour and reactions of men. Instead of fathers, husbands and brothers expecting their women to behave in compliance with the patriarchal code, i.e. to choose an honourable death over life in shame and with a feeling of guilt, Hindi authors usually present an idealised image of men as virtuous as Mahatma Gandhi, who saw raped women as innocent victims and accepted them without reservation or hesitation.⁴ Jiyaram, the male protagonist of *Toṣī*, addresses the heroine in the following words:

Daughter, you are like Ganga. The limitless expanse of Ganga's sanctity is equal only to god Rama's infinity. (Varmā 1962: 87)

Up to this point we have referred only to individual acts of violence against women – such as mutilation, rape or abduction. But the violence was not limited to those physical acts done by individuals or groups of aggressors. From 1948 onwards, Indian and Pakistani women were victims of a much more dangerous kind of violence – one that was institutional and done in the name of the law. According to the Indo-Pakistani agreement regarding the mutual recovery and repatriation of abducted women and children, all conversions and inter-religious marriages made after March 1, 1947 were declared null

⁴ Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin quote appeals by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru to the relatives of such women to treat them as clean and innocent and welcome them into the family. They also mention a pamphlet being published by the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation, instructing Hindus and Sikhs that menstruation is a natural method of ritual cleansing for women. (Menon, Bhasin 1998: 99-100)

and void. On both sides of the border special police and military units were constituted to reclaim abducted persons. The process of recovery and repatriation was involuntary, unconditional and provided for no exceptions. Both countries, acting as the patriarch-guardian of the nation's honour (or more precisely, the honour of the male half of the nation), attempted to regain their lost honour by means of the action of reclaiming and reconstituting their women. All Hindu and Sikh women were to be returned to India, while all Muslim women were sent to Pakistan.⁵

The honour of the clan in a patriarchal system, as well as the honour of the nation in the politics of both India and Pakistan constitute the highest values to which individual lives are subservient. A woman, being a carrier of male honour and the reaffirmation of his manhood, loses her status as a subject, becoming an object of quarrels, compromises and pacts made by men in her name. As no-one asks the object of a quarrel of its opinion, so no-one will listen to women's protests. Even if they, in a desperate defense against "repatriation" to their old community, ask for compassion and refer to their concern for the fate of their children:

*Chandrakanta is long dead, I was born of her – Sayeeda Khatun. My
parents are dead. But I have these two children – have mercy on them...*
(Jit 1995: 129)

The situation was made even more complicated by the fact that not all women who were officially declared abducted were actually captive victims. There were also among them those who converted to marry their true love, as well as those whose gratitude for saving their lives gradually evolved into love. In their new families they found peace and happiness, they loved and were loved – but nonetheless they too had to leave all this behind, to break marriages made of their own will and to abandon their partners forever. In the name of the law and honour of both countries happy families were torn apart, faithful wives were branded with shame and children were deprived of mothers, fathers (or both). Such stories, almost taken directly out of *kissas* (i.e. folk narrative poems depicting tragic romances of legendary heroes), make a popular theme in Panjabi short stories, e.g. Kartār S. Duggal's *Pakistan is Ours!* (*Pakistān hamārā hai!*), Gurmukh S. Jit's *Cold Walls* (*Ṭhāḍhīā kādḥā*), Gulzār S. Sādhū's *The Last Straw* (*Ātlā tīlā*), Sāt S. Sekhō's *Victory and Defeat* (*Jit te hār*) or *The Deposit* (*Amānat*).

While analysing the themes occurring in both Hindi and Panjabi short stories, one notices the absence of taboo subjects: understated, omitted or passed over in silence.

When we read of women sacrificing their lives to preserve their chastity, to protect the honour of their families and communities, works in Panjabi always mention suicides, and suicides alone. No wonder. Such an act was a reason for pride for the family, in fact it increased its social status, as those dead women were viewed as martyrs.

⁵ For further readings on the recovery and repatriation of women and children, see Menon, Bhasin 1998: 65-202; Butalia 1998: 81-220; Kidvāi 1990: 308-323; Kumar 2001: 269-301.

But in recently published documents, interviews and memories of the would-be suicides that were saved, we find a record of widespread “making an offering of the women’s and children’s lives” – beheading them with kirpans, shooting with firearms – by their male relatives (Singh 1994: 17-18; Butalia 1998: 146-184; Menon, Bhasin 1998: 47-51). Their actions were undoubtedly motivated by the fear of losing the honour of the clan and community, but it is certain that they were driven also by a fear for their own life. Making the offering of the lives of their wives, sisters and daughters, they tried to increase the chances of their own escape, which would be hindered by weaker and slower women and children. Having read hundreds of Panjabi short stories, I have been unable to find a single work which depicts such an event, which would suggest in even the slightest manner the active part of men in the “suicides” of women and children. Likewise, it is futile to look in Panjabi short stories for a work containing a male hero who flees leaving his wife behind, not caring about her safety and chastity or the clan’s honour.

In Hindi short stories the taboo pertains to abducted women, especially those who – for various reasons – did not wish to return to the countries they had been assigned to. Many of them could not free themselves from a feeling of co-responsibility for the shame and degradation they were subjected to, or were afraid of rejection by their old families and society; others could not and would not part with their children, born in the new marriages; all were rebellious at the thought of leaving behind (again!) everything they knew and had grown used to, what they had eventually come to love.

Hindu women who converted to Islam and lived among Muslims and bore them children, were a source of eternal humiliation and degradation for their previous families. It was far better to forget them forever and believe they were dead. The scanty short stories showing the fate and dilemmas of such heroines, e.g. *The Red Mansion* (*Lāl havelī*) by Śivānī, *The Fairface Sister* (*Gore bhain jī*) by Padmā Sacdev, or *One More Kunti* (*Ek aur Kuntī*) by Viṣṇu Prabhākar appeared only many years after the Partition, furthermore, none of them can be found in the collections of Partition short stories published recently.

Another thing worth mentioning is the lack of interest (common for Hindi authors as well as for those writing in Panjabi) in the future of women recovered and returned to “the country of origin”. The overwhelming majority of stories end at the moment of departure of the reclaimed captives. It is extremely rare to find even such a curt mention, as in the Hindi short story *Past* (*Atīt*) by Darśak, that a recovered girl was raped by soldiers escorting the convoy and later disappeared without a trace (Darśak: 111). Very few writers refer to the lack of acceptance of the recovered women by their original families, supposed to be waiting for them to come back. We get such a laconic remark in Padmā Sacdev’s *Gore bhain jī* (Sacdev 1988: 23) and we find out that one of the heroines of *Five Sisters* (*Pāḥ bhainā*) by Ammrītā Pṛītam, who after being forced to return was rejected by her family and thus ended up as a prostitute (Pṛītam 1976: 93). The only writer who openly and unequivocally criticised both the idea and process of the forcible recovery of women is Gurmukh S. Jīt, who takes on the voice of Íśvardas, one of the male protagonists of the short story *Ṭhādhṛā kādhā*:

We ripped them out from there, where they had managed to grow in and had been growing in stronger and stronger during the last few years, while we are not at all willing to accept them here. (Jit 1995: 136)

Neither Panjabi nor Hindi short stories find a place to talk about recovered women forced by the camp social services to undergo abortions⁶ or to abandon their children.

The inner compulsion of writing about the events of 1947 possessed the majority of Hindi writers and almost all Panjabi writers in the last half century. It was in a large part due to the belief of the indivisibility of Panjab as the common fatherland of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims and of their inability to accept the breakdown of *panjabiyat* – the traditional ethos of the Panjabis, common for all religious communities. This need was often caused by tragic personal experiences; sometimes it was caused by tales told by relatives, friends and neighbours, reinforced by the press. Khushwant Singh admitted openly: “The Partition theme was born out of a sense of guilt that I had done nothing to save the lives of innocent people and behaved like a coward.” (Singh 1982: 195) One wonders if he and his fellow writers did not behave as cowards again, by passing over in silence the sufferings of women caused by those who were supposed to protect them and take care of them – their fathers, brothers and husbands. These characteristic omissions in literature add to the silence of the women themselves, who, in accordance with the traditional moral norms of the patriarchal communities of the subcontinent, felt co-responsible for the abduction; who decided to live in shame, while they could have chosen an honourable death by committing suicide; who, finally, failed the expectations their families, community and nation had for them while refusing to become uprooted once again.

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⁶ As abortions were illegal at that time, women were first given “a complete medical check-up” (euphemism for an abortion) and only after that would camp social services contact their families. (Menon, Bhasin 1998: 83)

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