

## On the road to recovery women: Women in the Midst of Partition Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti* and Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*

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**Abstract:** The obtainable histories of Partition are frequently contaminated with nationalistic prejudice or talk about political proceedings rather than the experiences of citizens on the ground. This is perchance since a nation – state most often sets down its own version of selective history, which is expected to be accepted in order to consolidate and further its collective identity. In such histories voices which challenge or interrogate this meta-narrative are side-lined at best and totally ignored at worst so that alternative histories and perspectives that might break the selective linearity of the state's version are institutionally marginalized. The Radcliffe line which officially came into existence on Aug. 16, 1947, truncated the Indian sub-continent into India and Pakistan on the basis of territory as well as religion. On the other hand, this harmonized splitting up let free horror, lack of confidence, spiritual fury, and relocation of astounding scale in both the communities. Women were abducted, their 'purity' lost and their body became a medium on which retribution was taken, triumph distinguished. The piece of writing seeks to observe these questions with mention to Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti*, translated by the author himself and Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* translated by Khushwant Singh. The voices of abducted women during partition were lost under the dominant ideologies of martyrdom, purity and nationhood. The paper also tries to find out whether such independent female voices can be recuperated through literature. Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti* centre on the collective ignominy facing abducted women returned to their families and group of people from side to side the activities of the Recovery Operation. Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* Poro, defies patriarchal and territorial boundaries, successfully using her agency to critique the reality of partition by choosing to stay in Pakistan. A victim of cross-religious take hostage Poro succeeds in escaping from the authority of Rashida, her abductor, only to fall into the abyss of negative response from her parents.

**Keywords:** Partition, obtainable histories, Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti*.

### INTRODUCTION

On 6th December, 1947 an agreement was made between the governments of India and Pakistan regarding the recovery of abducted women. It was decided that conversions by persons abducted after March 1st, 1947 would not be recognized and all such persons were to be restored to their respective Dominions. It was clearly stated that the wishes of "the persons concerned are irrelevant". The question that naturally arises is that 'do women have a country?' Are they fully fledged citizens of their countries or is their "belonging" always linked to sexuality, honour, chastity, family, community and ultimately nationhood? The paper seeks to explore these questions with reference to Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti*, translated by the author himself and Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*,

translated by Khushwant Singh. The voices of abducted women during partition were lost under the dominant ideologies of martyrdom, purity and nationhood. The paper also tries to find out whether such independent female voices can be recuperated through literature.

Both Bharati Ray and Partho Chatterjee have expostulated on the politics of 'women's question' which had always been a central issue of nationalist thought. According to Bharati Ray, "When the 19th century social reform movement prioritized the 'woman question' in its agenda, it abolished the rites of Sati, legalized widow-remarriage, introduced women's education, but did not interfere ... with the traditional ideology of gender or patriarchal relationships. Even in the new construction of womanhood, it was the

conventional image of woman as wife and mother, simply garnished by education and some Victorian womanly, ideals borrowed from the West that was projected as “ideal”, for the “good” Indian woman” [1].

State was trying to establish its legitimacy and authority through the Recovery operation and making fervent appeals to the families of these women to accept them; on the communities their ideological inheritance had a powerful bearing. Even the handful of families “broadminded” enough to take back the abducted women, in the vast majority of cases, merely allowed them to live in the household, but did not rehabilitate them in the home in the manner in which they had earlier been a part. In any upheaval when sectarian passions are aroused or violence reigns supreme whether it is caste or communal violence or inter-state wars, women often become the worst victims of rival groups [2].

### Theoretical framework

Feminism refers to the “awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation within the family, at work and in society and conscious of victimization action by women and men change this situation” The significance of the immense potential of women would have remained confined to the margins had the world not produced reformers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, J.S. Mill, Simon de Beauvoir and the likes of them, whose persistent efforts gradually shifted the emphasis from androtexts to gynotexts. Consequently feminist consciousness emerged as the new spirit of the age. In India, the woman was even ‘deified’ as the representation of the goddess or mother served to rub out her sexuality in the world exterior home. But why is this fascination concerning ‘purity’ of woman? Is it because she was taken to be on behalf of the ‘purity’ of the religious community to which she belonged? Was also the load of nationwide honour laid too a lot on her shoulders? The young women were bartered and sold like a cheap chattel. Murders, abductions, rapes and conversions became a common scare. No community lagged behind and criminalization of human instinct assumed the prominence [3]. Is it because of this very reason that the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act 1949 denied the abducted women the possibility of asserting their political and civil rights and subjected them to forcible recovery to their respective Dominions? In India the anxiety with abducted women went hand in hand with “alarm at forcible conversions” [4].

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Rajinder Singh Bedi’s Lajwanti is one of the earliest literary accounts to focus on the social stigma facing abducted women returned to their families and community through the activities of the Recovery Operation. Set in the Punjab in the town of Ludhiana in the period immediately following partition Lajwanti tells the story of Sunder Lal’s wife of the same name,

who is separated from him during the sectarian violence. Lajwanti also refers to a ‘touch-me-not plant’ that has a unique quality of curling its leaves when touched or brushed, an action seen as indicative of shyness or shame, hence the root ‘laaj’ which refers to shame. The Rehabilitation Committee in Sunder Lal’s Community sings a Punjabi folksong that refers to the Lajwanti plant as the march through the area, suggesting an analogy between the plant and ‘abducted’ women. The narrator indicates how the song has a special significance for Sunder Lal: At early dawn, when Sunder Lal led ‘prabhat pheris’ through the half-awakened streets, and his friends, Rasalu, Neki Ram and others sang in fervid chorus :

‘These are the tender leaves of touch-me-not, my friend; they will shrivel and curl up even if you as much as touch them ...’ it was only Sunder Lal whose voice would suddenly choke with ... he would think of his Lajwanti whom wanton hands had not only touched but torn away from him ... And as his thoughts wandered in the alley of a sharp and searing pain, his legs would tremble on the hard, cold flag stones of the streets [5].

It can be argued that Sunder Lal’s faltering steps suggest that he has doubts about his own ability to accept Lajwanti back if she is found. The song would also appear to have an ambivalent connotation for the Rehabilitation Committee and the community, it is trying to influence; ‘abducted’ women were seen as ‘polluted’ and the ambivalent interpretation of Lajwanti’s curling action resonates with the community’s ambiguous response to the return of the women. Although the community seemed to respond well to other ‘rehabilitation’ activities, yet there was this problem regarding ‘Rehabilitate them in your hearts!’ The narrator himself says that this programme was, staunchly opposed by the inmates of the temple and the orthodox conventional people who lived in the vicinity. Public exercises of national unity in the civil sphere – a key feature of nationalists thought from its inception in the early nineteenth century are mimicked by the narrator’s journalistic account of how the local ‘rehabilitation committee’ is established. Ceremoniously the narrator states how: “Babu Sunder Lal was elected Secretary of this committee, by a majority of eleven votes ... Their confidence rested perhaps on the fact that Sunder Lal’s own wife had been abducted.

When Lajwanthi returned to her home (Sunder Lal neither rejects nor beats her). She comes to understand that his acceptance of her is in exchange for her silence and performance according to the demands of patriarchy. Sunder Lal’s reception of Lajwanti is torn between his negative reaction to her ‘healthiness’ and ‘well being’ (suggesting that she may not have been as much of a ‘victim’ of the other man as he would like to think) Sunder Lal addresses Lajwanti as ‘devi’ or

goddess placing her identity, agency and everyday experiences with the other community under erasure. While he places the 'blame' for the stigma attached to Lajwanti's honour on social conventions, he also invalidates her potential to resist those conventions. The narrative suggests therefore, that the ambivalent terms of Lajwanti's reintegration into the community and nation state require her to surrender her identity as a woman who can question her husband or renegotiate the terms of her patriarchal patronage.

In stark contrast to Lajwanti we have Amrita Pritam's Poro who defies patriarchal and territorial boundaries, effectively using her agency to critique the reality of partition by choosing to stay in Pakistan. A victim of cross-religious abduction Poro succeeds in escaping from the clutches of Rashida, her abductor, only to fall into the abyss of rejection from her parents as they comment that she has now lost faith and birthright and hence her parents will not help her at any resort. It is perhaps this refusal of her family to accept her back that helps to surface the voice of resistance lying latest inside her:

*When she had come this way earlier, she had believed she was returning to life; she had wanted to live again, to be with her mother and father. She had come full of hope. Now she had no hope, nor any fear [6].*

She now marries Rashida as it Poro's way of protesting against her parents and the Hindu community who brutally close their doors on her. After marriage, Poro initially regards her body as 'unclean', in keeping with the codes of 'purity' of her religion. Her anguish is inconsolable when she discovers that she is carrying her abductor turned husband's child. She is rechristened 'Hamida'. Now, she is Poro only in her dreams and in her reminiscences of her parent's home. This duality she cannot take affably to and is soon reduced to mere skin and bones: Hamida by day, Poro by night. The birth of her soon, Javed, is a turning point in Poro's life. She is forced to analyze her emotions and the change in them with time. Though she remains scarred, Poro (renamed Hamida) comes to accept her new identity, and prosper in a provisional; post traumatic sort of way. Communal discord consequent to the partition of India rises to an unprecedented degree of severity and the horror of the cataclysmal onset of the partition riots becomes unbelievable. The world in the novel emerges from a simple past into a violent complex present and the novelist here seeks to chart the effect of that shift on the individual and society. We are told how furious Poro, now Hamida, was every time she heard of the abduction of Hindu girls by Muslims and of Muslim girls by Hindus for none of these abducted girls would now have any place to go back to. They would be derelicts at the mercy of their abductors. On hearing from Ramchand, the man with whom her marriage had initially been fixed by her family, that one such woman was his sister Lajo, now her brother's wife, Poro cannot help herself from pleading with Rashid to

help her locate the girl. Together they are successful in locating Lajo, kept confined in her own family home at Rattoval by a Muslim man. However, Poro, (now Hamida) cannot contain her agitation when Rashid informs her of the Government Proclamation ordering people to hand over all abducted persons, so that they could be exchanged for other similarly abducted by Indians. Parents had been exhorted to receive back their abducted daughters. A sense of resentment surges through her mind: When it had happened to her, religion had become an insurmountable obstacle; neither her parents nor her in-laws to be had been willing to accept her. And now the same religion had become so accommodating! It is perhaps this resentment which is at the root of the resistance shown by her at the end of the novel. She hands over Lajo to Ramchand and her own brother. It is then that her brother urges her to return with them to India. Even Poro herself knew that she just had to declare that she was a Hindu. It is at this moment that she exercises her choice, challenging the national obsession with borders. But she declares that her home is now in Pakistan. Poro thus, makes the non-normative choice to refuse the offer of inclusion and interpolation into family, community, nation that was once denied to her. In doing so, she recreates her own identity, 'Hamida', which had once been thrust upon her. She also creates new spaces for those abducted women for whom relocation would be synonymous with uprooting for the second time.

## CONCLUSION

Though the article focuses on the shock of abducted women, yet it cannot avoid observing that abduction was a problem which affected both men and women. This was the result of the incompatible goals that the group of people and condition had set out to attain during their contribution in the Recovery Operation. The mass movement of the people on foot, by bus, train, and car left women, children, the aged and infirm, the disabled, particularly vulnerable' [7]. On one hand there were the age old customs the patriarchy while on the other hand was the State's desperate attempt to establish the legality of its separatist, worldly make-believe by eliding the stress on women's 'sexual purity' as a representation of the public honour. Men were perplexed by these odds goals, not eloquent how to reposition their womenfolk in the household area. As a outcome the ill fated women, Sita of the present world, steady to give their Agni-pariksha though the discrepancy remained unsolved. Poro thus, makes the non-normative option to turn down the offer of placing and statement into family, population, country that was once deprived of to her. In doing so, she recreates her own identity, 'Hamida', which had once been thrust upon her. She also creates new spaces for those abducted women for whom transfer would be identical with uprooting for the second time. The widespread collapse of law and order in 1947 was attended by a collapse of moral values, or perhaps in some cases an intensified expression of normal, immoral behaviour, so

that large number of men lost their sense of humanity and deliberately trampled on the virtues of women whose only crime was that they belonged to a different religious community [8]. The story suggests consequently, that the unsure terms of Lajwanti's reintegration into the group of people and country state necessitate her to give in her individuality as a woman who can query her husband or renegotiate the conditions of her patriarchal benefaction. Although the piece of writing focuses on the distress of abducted women, yet it cannot avoid observing that abduction was a problem which affected both men and women. Was this the produce of the incompatible goals that the social order and state had set out to attain through their participation in the Recovery Operation? On one hand there were the age old background of the patriarchy while on the other hand was the State's fraught attempt to create the validity of its supporter of independence, knowing desire by eliding the significance on women's 'sexual purity' as a pictogram of population respect. Men were perplexed by these differing goals, not shrewd how to shuffle their womenfolk in the ancestral orb. As a outcome the miserable women, Sita of modern times continued to give their Agni-pariksha at the same time as the disagreement remained unanswered. Thus, the partition literature explores the conflicts of loyalties, the fragility of relationships and the divisions between home and nation. From within these fissures arises the need to re-examine the fixities of such concepts as honour and chastity [9]. Thus it is compelling to examine the partition literature in order to rework the gender experience of the event and to make the inarticulately pain accessible. Moreover, the partition fiction deals with the common gendered experiences, hopes and fears that transcended the communal divide. The partition fiction attempts to address the mental pain and their predicament. It uncovers the hitherto understood version of savagery of male power impinged on the women's body during the partition. In the silence surrounding the women experience, the literature speaks for their inarticulable pain and their demolished selfhood.

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