

Partition Tales: ‘Bonds of Suffering...Deep, Dark, Unbreakable’

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Abstract:

*The short story which constitutes this paper shows the gruesome side of society during splitting of the nation when women became victims of both, the Partition and patriarchy. This paper examines Urdu story translated into English as *Banished* written by Jamila Hashmi. Traumatized tales of women have always been overlooked within the structure of history and grand narratives of the Partition. This is one of the stories of affected women by Jamila Hashmi foregrounding the psychological state of a woman, the nameless narrator-heroine, who was forced to live with her abductor-husband.*

Keywords: Myth, Partition, Tale, Women.

Introduction:

Jamila Hashmi (1929-89) has written some short stories and novels. She was awarded the Adamjee Literary Prize in 1960 for her first novel *Talash-e-Bahara* translated as *In Search of Spring*. *Atash-e-Rafta* translated as *The Fire and the Past* is her renowned book which portrays rural Punjab. Her historical novels telling Qurratullian Tahira, the Iranian poetess, and Mansoor Mallaji are highly celebrated. The short story which constitutes this paper shows the gruesome side of society during splitting of the nation when women became victims of both, the Partition and patriarchy. This paper examines Urdu story translated into English as *Banished* written by Jamila Hashmi

Traumatized tales of women have always been overlooked within the structure of history and grand narratives of the Partition. This is one of the stories of affected women by Jamila Hashmi foregrounding the psychological state of a woman, the nameless narrator-heroine, who was forced to live with her abductor-husband. *Banished* constructs an individual account by taking resort to the myth of Sita and by turning the pre-colonial history into the social text to tell the personal narrative, and moreover, the story “refracts dominant political rhetoric in India at the time. The widespread political rhetoric in India during the Partition further inscribed female bodies by casting all abducted women as mythical Sitas.” (Menon 127) The narrative contains two strings of memory: the cherished pre-Partition life and the violated and unalterable post- Partition life. Built on the religious mythology, it is set on Dasher day and retells the myth by using an image of a banished Sita as the metaphor for the eponymous protagonist:

“The fire’s ambers will burn and jump for a long while, giving nearby faces a grotesque look, as if every last face, a veritable image of Ravan, has come to watch with glee Sita's ordeal of separation, her gruelling banishment all over again. Banishment is a hard thing to endure. But does one have control over anything? Anything at all? Who wants to suffer knowingly?” (85)

The focal character, the storyteller identifies herself with an exiled Sita, rather in more miserable state as Sita was saved and brought back by Rama, but the present day Sita lives in the perpetual state of exile that doesn’t have Rama or even a hope of Rama. “The narrator’s discontinuous identification with Sita reiterates the ways in which she is constituted through her relational ties to people, places, festivals and stories. The mimetic relation here reveals her as always already haunted by a spectral lateritic. The Exile presents a narrative subject who is constituted at the cusp of the dominant discursive

realm of Hindu gods, festivals and cultural practices on the one hand and her particular experiences of Muslim gendered subjectivity on the other.” (Menon 128-129) Permanently confined in the kingdom of Ravana, she becomes the embodiment of violence picturing the pathetic society which celebrates the fall of Ravana but encircled with vices even now. According to Menon: “The story heaves between the carnivalesque Ramlila fair and its underbelly—the gruesome bodies on display in the violence of the Partition. The giant, carnival idols of Ramlila refract the “real” bodies with gaping mouths, protruding eyes, and swollen faces. “The Exile” locates the violence of the Partition at the juncture of symbolic abstractions and somatic brutalities.” (128) Women were entrapped everlastingly, doomed to suffer as their abused life, the unseen scars on her mind and her emotional injuries are irrecoverable. She becomes an unwed wife of Gurpal and feels affronted when somebody addresses her as „*bahu*’ (daughter-in-law). By calling her ‘*bahu*’, the society attempts to rub her abduction and ill-treatment but on her part, it is ironic, a word of abuse, making aware of her victimhood and „self” after exploitation. She is obliged to this status which is a reminder of her painful past disturbing present also and this anguish can be seen when she says, “Whenever anyone calls me *bahu*, I feel insulted.” (86)

Her post-marriage life began with sufferings and became a never-ending journey of pain and torment when she receives human treatment neither from her mother-in-law Bari Ma nor from her husband. Bari Ma was indifferent and unresponsive towards her, rather contented of getting the replacement of a maid than being pleased on the arrival of a *bahu*. Her reconciliation and acceptance was only the physical separation from her root from where she was brutally cut off and forcefully brought to an unknown land. In spite of having three children and later getting the affection of Bari Ma, the feeling of alienation remains. Bereft of the right to speak, she often tries to protest unconsciously by evoking her memory, her past. She mourns: “Who has the time or inclination to listen to Sitaji's lament in this country? The pain of loneliness is hard to bear. And life so difficult...Where can I go—with my wounded heart, my darkened fate?” (93) Patriarchal society draws a line under the preteens of protection and keeps a woman within space—a ‘*lakshman rekha*’ which is not allowed to cross and live a life man chooses for her. This narrative echoes corollary of the Partition on women who are bereft of a right even on their body and their lives are restricted by patriarchal customs. The narrator becomes the wife of Gurpal without a social ceremony or legal sanction who brought her to Sangraon and shut her in his house where she was unwelcomed, abused and beaten by both, her husband and her mother-in-law. She states: “Nobody said a word to me. Oh, what a welcome this new bride was offered! Since that day I too felt like Sita, enduring her exile, incarcerated in Sangraon.” (87) The author uses an image of the lost children to express the protagonist’s feeling of separation, her yearning to reunite with her root while knowing the inability to return. The narrator is unable to retrace her steps; her hopes from her original family are faint and lost forever in storm of the Partition like a lost nation. Incapable of regaining her people and past, carrying the sorrow silently is the only choice given to her. Ketu Katrak notes that the “issues of exteriority (material survival) and interiority (psychological feelings, subalterity as psychological and political) are rooted in systems of political domination and silencing of female subjectivities.” (22) Being a vacant, without hope or desire, her loneliness and emptiness described through her identification with the objects of nature, a lonely star and a barren tree. She conveys her lonesomeness in these words: “In the blue, empty space its loneliness reminds me of my banishment. In this human wilderness I am like a lonely tree which neither blossoms nor bears fruit.” (89) The heroine is anonymous because she is without an identity, always addressed either as a *bahu* of Gurpal or as a daughter- in-law of Bari Ma or a mother of three children rather than by her name. Gradually Bari Ma becomes tender and considers her as Lakshmi only to gain control over her:

“Patriarchal and political interpretations of traditional, religion and ritual often control the expression and withholding of female sexuality.” (Katrak 202)

The protagonist's relationship with her previous life and non-traumatized self is unbreakable and this inability of forgetting pre-Partition life and her abduction are expressed through her monologue: "When man's body shrinks and turns rigid, his heart is emptied of all hope. Then he is fit to be worshipped like a god...My heart is empty. I'm Lakshmi. And yet, the bonds of suffering endure. They are deep, strong, unbreakable." (91) It shows when a woman abandons her hope and desire; she is considered a goddess and this andocentric ideology takes women's humanity by exalting her to the place of a goddess. Elevating a woman to the status of a goddess or mythological figure is a way of negating her emotions, aspirations, views, disregarding her sufferings and "along with scriptural authority confirming woman-as- slave/property, powerful images of ideal womanhood are part of a collective consciousness, represented and reinforced in mythological stories." (Katrak 177) Bari Ma, by imposing a new identity, tries controlling and moulding her into a conventional Hindu woman, erasing and shifting her „self“ and religious identity from Muslim to Sikh as "A politics of the female body must include the constructions and controls of female sexuality, its acceptable and censored expressions, its location socio culturally, even materially, in postcolonial regions." (in preface Katrak) By calling her Lakshmi, an epitome of an ideal Hindu wife, compliant and loyal, society forces her to remain faithful and dutiful even to a man who sullied her and confiscates her religion and identity. The narrator "confirms the bourgeois respectability that marriage conferred on abducted women." (Menon 130) She is expected to follow the principal ideology of married women, become a *pativrata*, maintaining physical and mental purity even for a man who attacked her chastity. *Pativrata*, the image of a faithful and spiritual wife is the central icon and more than just being the domestic concept, it is the social and national image of a woman. Gural, by marrying her, attempts to wipe the mutilation he enacted, "examines the ways in which the violent crimes of perpetrators against women were obscured or re signified; converting or marrying these abducted women offered a means for the perpetrators to rewrite their own violent past." (Menon 130) Her abductor is "retroactively re signifying and legitimizing his criminal behaviour. The dominant perception of converting the "ethnic others" as an act of conquest is mobilized in this context, where private shame masquerades as ethnic chauvinism." (Menon 131) Representing herself as Sita is a way of portraying her state of silence, her status as a submissive woman. "Chakravarty and Roy provide a concrete historicization rather than the timeless and transcendent virtues that Sita carries as a model of Indian womanhood. A historical approach reveals that the classical version of the epic represents the most patriarchal image of Sita as subservient and silent." (qtd. in Katrak 58)

The memory constantly reminds her rootlessness and violence which continuously haunts her and this "recollection makes for a reliving of time past even as time present interrupts memory. Every day time and life-time overlap, and each woman's story reveal how she has arranged her present within the specific horizons of her past and her future."(qtd. in Menon and Bhasin 18) Reappearance of memories is the traumatic repeat of the past. The protagonist is forced to forget her past, family, religion, village and her roots and made part of a Sikh family that resulted in absolute alienation from her original self. The effects of separation comes out through evocating her history; her reminiscence depicts her present situation, her isolation and inability to fit altogether in a different world and this continuous bringing of past into present displays the contrast between public sphere and private sphere. Veena Das observes: "The body did not simply develop its own idiom and its own memory in response to violence and trauma as an act of representation, the appropriation of the body of the victim for making memory though the infliction of pain was itself an important component of the terror." (Das 188) Through the familial past, she desires to bring back her purity, dignified life and inviolate self which are more desirable than her present but she cannot backtrack. Her longing and bonding with her root remains unbroken even after the storm that left her uprooted. Memory constantly laments for the lost world and affects the present and future but she is bind to her duty as a woman, a wife and a mother. The huge gap

between dream and reality results in conflict, questioning and re-examining the past that shows the psychological and emotional battle where she is unable to forget and feels both physically and emotionally exiled. “The experience of internalized exile unfolds as a process that includes the female protagonists’ complicated levels of consent and collusion to domination. The unfolding, indeed the process of the body being exiled, brings female protagonists to a “luminal” state of consciousness.” (Katrak 2) The ending line expresses her inability of pushing the boundaries of patriarchy and nation. In Katrak’s words: “Indigenous patriarchies, in contending with new institutionalized modes of sexuality often colluded with colonial patriarchy thus adding to women’s domination.” (Katrak 48) Trapped in a newly born but degenerated nation, the unidentified narrator fluctuates between optimism and hopelessness. Longing to recover her „self“, she is hopeful about the arrival of her brother but also very well aware of the reality that because the society considers “ostracizes raped woman as unacceptable members of society.” (Bruschi 289) Ultimately, she surrenders herself to destiny and accepts the devastated and broken life, living with a man who is a slayer of her parents and an abductor of her. She is conscious of her victimhood, of irremediable pain—physical emotional and psychological.

The constant coming of past experience in the form of memories is a mind’s effort to comprehend what it couldn’t get at the actual moment of violence. However, by asserting her trauma, the narrator challenges and breaks the margins of womanhood structured by patriarchy. She also makes an effort to raise a voice when Guralp says regarding her parent’s slaughter and her mutilation:

“Can’t you ever bring yourself to forget that incident? That was a different time.”

“How can I make him understand that time never changes...those who readily laid down their lives to save the virtue of their sisters and daughters considered a woman’s honour no more than an illusion. (97)

Trying to break her silence, she speaks about the injustice done to her. She keeps alive the fire of these memories smouldering within which shows her intimate connection with the land. Articulation of trauma signals at the assertion of selfhood and individuality. The memory of mutilation relentlessly frustrates her and the state of silence ends when she recounts her story with the self-awareness as a victim. Her act of narrating her own story is itself resistance against the society which tries to hide or to cover up the wrong done to her by giving the beautiful label of a „bahu“. The defiled woman, who is compelled to be mute, begins to talk about her traumatic condition and her sufferings. Milan Kundera comments in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: It is an act of resistance that makes Hashmi’s narrator record her life story. The social compulsions that make Guralp and his mother attempt to efface her “real” identity (of an abducted, raped and kept woman) and substitute a “false” identity (of a bahu) in its place, are resisted by the narrator in her consciousness, by her act of recalling, remembering and recording the past. (qtd. in Ravikant and Saint 199)

Living the double life, she vacillates between yearnings and hopelessness. Though she has two identities, she is nameless because her both identities are granted by the society. The way in which the writers have understood, incorporated and presented these memory, experience and trauma through fictions become significant within the nationalist discourse. Memory becomes the medium to recollect the experience which history failed to cover. The story skilfully lays bare pain and misery from the standpoint of a female and raises the strongest repulsion against such insensitive acts. The concluding sentence points the meaninglessness of life where she is weary of enduring pain, only breathing and surviving, not living: “Another day has ended. And days do get away from you, like gusts of wind. How far do I still have to go?” (103)

Conclusion:

Such a nation if personified will only exude the state of hopelessness and become pessimistic like the narrator. Independence didn’t bring any anticipation for the beginning of a new era; it only

brought darkness and gloom. The new dawn of Independence was welcomed with communal frenzy, rape, bloodshed and the division of lands and minds. The new born country is surrounded by an evil that is enslaved eternally like the present day Sita. The protagonist's narration signifies the narration of a nation which is in the custody of Ravana called "Partition".

Notes

1. The title of this paper is taken from Jamila Hashmi's short story *Banished*. p.91
2. *Banished* is originally written in Urdu by Jamila Hashmi and translated by Muhammad Umar Menon in his anthology *An Epic Unwritten*.

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