

PARTITION AND TREATMENT OF WOMEN: THE LOST RIBBON- A STORY BY SHOBHA RAO

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Partition, the consequence of end of long rule of British over India has been documented as one of the most lethal incidents in human history. Dream of freedom after independence remained an illusion for certain section of society. It didn't happen as it was considered. Rather being only as an act of division of a geographical region from its main land, it resulted in massacre that has casted stigma permanently on people belonging to both countries. Years have been passed but those memories are still fresh in the minds of people who have experienced it. Figuratively, in the world history this portion is written with blood of people who became victim of this massacre.

With the announcement of transfer of power, boundaries were also announced that divided Punjab into two parts. Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs were ordered to migrate to their respective homelands as fixed by leaders. This sudden upheaval gave rise to communal riots and worked as fuel on fire for hatred people of different communities had in their hearts. In order to take revenge they started killing. The darker side of this picture is that where men and children were killed, most of women were kept alive, so that they could be raped, abducted and could be transferred to other religion (Of Abductor). This was committed on both sides of border. Primary reason was only to bring shame to the community they were belonging. It was also noted that women were forced to commit mass suicide by their own husbands to escape from the clutches from others (Abductors). (This is handled amazingly in film *Khamosh Pani- Silent Waters*).

In a situation of civil war, where nearly every man is a soldier fighting for his homeland women come to be seen as a 'territory' to be occupied.- Andrew J. Major

History being its true witness don't truly stands for what was really happened that night. It has only come up with numbers, rather than mentioning individuals' suffering. It is a mere factual details of events and does not depict human suffering as it was actually occurred that night. The experience of women as both victim and survivor of violence is completely absent from pages of history. Urvashi Butalia in her work *Voices of Women* has rightly observed that history has neglected to paint the true picture of women's experience. It is only literature that has given space to what history has skipped and become voice of every individual. It has become a canvas on which writers from all over the world has painted the real picture of suffering humanity.

Writers from all languages of the Indian sub-continent particularly Hindi, English, Urdu, Bengali and other vernaculars have given space to human sufferings, which is common element in literature of all these languages. These have elaborated same tragedy of rape, murder, treachery, barbarism and common thrust of blood among people from different angles in their works. They have stood for every individual who has suffered and are still wailing because of the injustice done to them.

Authors such as Krishna Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Amrita Pritam, Saddat Hasan Manto, K.S. Duggal, Nanak Singh and others have revolved their prose on the subject of partition. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*; Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man and Bride*, Salman Rushdi's *Midnight's Children*, K.A. Abbas' *Inquilab* in English, Bhishma Sahani's *Tamas* and Yashpal's *Jhootha Sach* in Hindi give an insight into the hardships that common people had to endure in this nasty battle of power and politics.

One of these writers is Shobha Rao, an Indo- American novelist known for her debut novel *Girls Burning Bright* and *The Unrestored Women and Other Stories*. Both of her works intensify issues related to women self. The book named *The Unrestored Women and Other Stories* is portrayal of enacting violence during the act of partition. It depicts all scenes, from torturing of village people by religious group to the suffering of a mother separated from her child. It is a story of every village of India and Pakistan. The focus is on women characters individually who in spite of being part of independent countries, were far away from freedom. How they were sacrificed for sake of honour. Thousands were raped and killed brutally. Those who were survived, they were abducted. Their lives were permanently paralysed after going through these tragic incidents. This experience left them to search for their identity. They were completely shaken to introspect who they really are, from where they belong to, their relation to country, community, religion and family. By exposing this the most horrible side of event of partition writer attempts to challenge all social

and religious institutions from marriage to law, politics and judiciary that had failed to provide equivalence in society.

Women characters in mentioned work, while going through traumatic experience, enduring mental and physical pain, chose to live. They don't lose hope till end. They were raped, tortured, alienated that resulted in their loss of their identity. Their inability to overcome these circumstances are very clear from their dialogues and soliloquies. Their language is appropriate to depict their suffering, their quest that led them to believe in themselves and to accept themselves who they really are. Through this they get their freedom to live at their own, from which they were deprived of even after being part of independent country.

The Lost Ribbon narrated in first person point of view, the story of a Hindu woman who was abducted by a Muslim man on the partition night. She was kept hidden from police and society where she was raped and tortured. She being impotent, murders her daughter. This story starts from recalling the murder scene. The story is set in a girls' hostel room where she was living at last, hardly passing her time in loneliness, reminding her past and simultaneously running away from it by keeping herself busy in fruitless work of counting dal lentils. She says, "Most nights I count them and put them back in tin. On others nights, when I am not feeling well, I place them in little piles, separated by colour, and watch as each of piles grows and grows." (P-111)

The lost ribbon of title is used as a metaphor for main character's desires and of all other women who had gone through same experience. She reminds that ribbon she had lost early in her childhood. She thinks like that ribbon all her desires have been lost forever. She makes her daughter wear same type of ribbon that she used to wear. When she was going to murder her daughter, she mentions, "You hadn't spoken a word. How could you? Only tiny yellow ribbon seemed capable still of speech, still upright, oblivious, delighted by the fitness of your hair, by the life it would never lead." (P-106) This reminds her of the incident that completely changed her life when she was raped and she was wearing the same ribbon. She recalls that that was the first act that reduced her to nothing, made her feel that how weak as a woman is. She reminds the charm of possessing that ribbon when she was a school going girl. She used to wash and dry it and keep it under her pillow to wear it next day for school. That was the only happiness that she had being a child. But it was soon lost when her classmate grabbed it and ran away. That day she thought it was only that the ribbon she had lost not the happiness or charm related to it. She was somewhere hopeful to get that happiness back in her life again. But the day she was raped she was confirmed that she had lost all. While watching stars outside through window she thinks:

It was quick and steady beating, a fluttering, and I thought, it's the bird, it's left me with its heart. And though I have lost its tail I have lost its tail I haven't, I have not, lost its heart.

But on that night, at that window, looking at those horrible stars, I knew I'd lost both (P-109).

She recalls that charm of wearing that colourful ribbon again in story when she makes her daughter wear same ribbon while getting her ready for murder. While introspecting she reminds her childhood, womanhood and motherhood, the phases that were full of distress and helplessness. Her inability to change her circumstances is very clear when she decides to kill her daughter and she justifies her act by saying that she don't want her daughter to suffer as she did during her life. It was very hard for her but she decided to kill her. As she recalls: "I felt the gentle curve of your windpipe, your brave and rumpled pulse, and I told myself, if you don't kill her, he will." (P-106)

Then she recalls the continuous torture she had gone through when she was under the custody of a Muslim man. She had spent almost two years in a closed dark hut in Pakistan. Where she was tortured and raped daily by that man. Living under critically unhygienic conditions and after losing hope of her survival she gives birth to a baby girl 'Noora'. Giving her name 'Noora' which stands for light, shows her hopefulness towards life. But her hopes again dashed to ground when some Indian soldiers came in search of lost Hindu women finds her and orders her to come with them. Her last hopes were scattered into pieces when she came to know that she can't take her daughter to India because she is now citizen of Pakistan. This reminds her of havoc that partition had brought into her life.

With these references social and political institution has also been challenged. How these institutions determine our identity is very clear from the scene when soldier told her that she can't bring her baby because she is citizen of Pakistan. He said:

The child," the woman said. "She can't come."

Where?"

"Back to India of course." Her voice was slow and measured, and yet I struggled to understand.

"But why? She is my daughter."

"But she's is a citizen of Pakistan. She's a Muslim."(P-117)

Later when she insists on keeping her daughter with her.

She says:

You have no choice," she said. "There are governmental treaties we must follow."

"What treaties? What governments?"

"Between India and Pakistan"

"But this is my child."

"She is a child of Pakistan," the old Solider said solemnly.

"And you, my dear, are not." (P-118).

Separation from her daughter reminds her of her separation from her family. Symbol of a piece of cloth stuck in hook is used for her being stuck alone away from her family in hands of a Muslim man. When soldiers came there in search of her. She wanted to empty her heart before them, but some where she couldn't because she was helpless. She thinks: "I wanted to tell them that that was how I came here, with you, because of something as simple as heart-breaking as a piece of cloth caught on an iron gate."(P-117).

It was that fearful experience that lead her to murder her daughter. She didn't want her daughter to experience same circumstance that she had faced being alone and helpless. So she decided to commit a heinous act that no mother can ever think to commit. She murders her two months old daughter. Story has brief description of her introspection while preparing her daughter for murder, of strangulating her and after her murder. She says: "But what I would tell you now, is that I was long dead before I ever killed you?"(P-105)

Throughout there is a constant conflict between an individual and outer world, between her desires, mental, emotional and physical needs and circumstances. Which is very clear from main character's introspection. All those acts like giving birth to child then killing her, enduring physical torture of rape, cigarette burns, and daily physical assaults are somewhere make her feel that she doesn't exist as a normal human being. She was even deprived of sun light as she was kept in a room in which even a single ray of light couldn't pass inside. At last she keep herself away from all worldly things and spends time in hostel room counting dal lentils. She tells Leela that she don't want to listen to radio or television, as these are too loud for her. She finish her conversation by telling how many lentils she counts daily in thirty minutes. It was raining outside, the candle blew out. Story ends in her thinking if she could have had more light.

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