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NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 17 – WOMANHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD

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HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Imagination of the Mother/Female Kin of the Martyr

- Jawaharlal Nehru's **The Discovery of India**, which is described in Bumiller's book, states:
- "Our ladies stepped up to the plate and took command of the battle. Of course, women had always existed, but suddenly there was an avalanche of them, which surprised not only the British authorities but also their own men. Here were these ladies, higher or middle-class women living in their own homes—peasant women, working-class women, wealthy women—pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of official order... It wasn't only their bravery and boldness; what was much more unexpected was the organisational power they demonstrated" (Bumiller 19).
- Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent civil disobedience campaign was known as the **Satyagraha movement**, in which women actively participated.



Imagination of the Mother/Female Kin of the Martyr

- The majority of the recorded history of India's Partition does not include accounts of common men, women, and children suffering, as well as how the event impacted all those who lived through it.
- Like wars and other types of violence, Partition had a distinct impact on women than on men, owing to the unique duties and responsibilities associated with each gender.
- Women were not the ones who chose their fate, whether to suicide, survive, or migrate. They were subjected to violence at many levels, including community, familial, and macro levels.

Imagination of the Mother/Female Kin of the Martyr

- Women were seen as emblems of honour on both sides, and their dishonour was seen as a betrayal of a community's faith, culture, and everything considered as sacrosanct by the people.
- A woman impregnated by a man from another race was considered as impure, and the child born into such circumstances tainted the race's sense of purity.
- Consequently, in the vast majority of situations, women did not make the decisions. They accepted the choices that their family or circumstances had made for them.

Woman and Partition

- In her book "**The Other Side of Silence**," Urvashi Butalia discusses how people keep silent about missing women in their families.
- She writes of one such family, the majority of whose members had been slaughtered during division. "They had made no direct mention of their sisters, two of them, who had vanished at the time. Everyone in their immediate vicinity is familiar with the story. I realised there were numerous separate histories hidden in the stillness. The accounts that have always lurked on the outside of the ones that have been recounted."

Imagination of the Mother/Female Kin of the Martyr

- They were being abducted, raped, and murdered. To safeguard the family honour, they were compelled to commit suicide.
- Furthermore, they were abandoned by their relatives in the name of recovery, and their children were denied fundamental rights because they were deemed unlawful and sinful.

Imagination of the Mother/Female Kin of the Martyr

- **Nayanika Mookerjea** - the sentiment of sorrow is built differently around male and female war victims. While the pain of a father or brother of a raped woman is “emphasized as part of the nationalist commemoration of the war” (45), the female loss is localized in relational terms – a sorrowful widow, mother and sister.
- War and civil disruptions frequently cultivate the expressive imagery of “patriotic motherhood” (Ardener and Holden 1987, quoted in Mookherjee 45) and “an ever ready womb” (Cooke 1996, quoted in Mookherjee 45) sending sons and husbands to combat zones.



Woman and Partition

- **Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin** look at the gendered form of massacres that took place during Partition, when a woman's body became a synecdoche of honour for her kin's community, and conversely a territory of annexation for the enemy. How a woman's body bore the brunt of inter-communal hatred and became a receptacle of morbid radicalism is understood from acts, such as tattooing or amputating of the woman's private parts with the enemy community's slogans
- Penetration and disfiguring of her body was considered as violation of whatever was considered as sacrosanct and exclusively by the other community. To add to this affliction, women's own families (both male and female) took on quasi-murderers' roles, goading the violated women to commit group suicides through strangulation, jumping into fire/wells/rivers or by touching electric fires.

Woman and Partition

- **Urvashi Butalia** states in her chapter "**Gender and Nation: Some Reflections from India**," which was published in 2004 as part of the book *From Gender to Nation* (edited by Rada Ivekovi and Julie Mostov):
- "When women narrate the nation, they do so rather differently than men. In men's narratives of the nation, women are often seen as symbols of national and family honour. In women's narratives, the concerns are often different: the need to keep the family together, to contain grief, to put closures on unexplained deaths, to try and somehow contain the violence that such a situation inevitably unleashes."

Woman and Partition

- **Rajinder Singh Bedi, Rahi Masoom Raza, Ismat Chughtai, Manto, Yashpal, Bhisham Sahni, and Amrita Pritam** were among the writers who documented the experience of female riot victims' trauma on unparalleled sizes in their tales and novels.
- These accounts were eventually corroborated by the records of notable scholars, such as **Urvashi Butalia, Ashis Nandy, Veena Das, Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, and Gyanendra Pandey.**

Imagination of the Mother/Female Kin of the Martyr

- The meaning of 'home' –
- While the tragedy pertaining to loss of material possessions is uniformly associated with male members, a woman's tragedy is mostly hinged around her body. In Indian society, a woman is not usually associated with the rights of acquired assets, such as home or landed property. This draws on **Sara Suleri's** observation: "Men live in homes, and women live in bodies"
- The majority of the women who were forced to flee their homes did so with the expectation of returning once the situation had stabilised.
- The character of Amma in "Jaadein" ("Roots") by Ismat Chughtai and Joginder Paul's Urdu story Darugaon Pyaas ("Thirst of Rivers") depict the character of "Bebe," where old matriarchs are either too adamant or carries the haveli in her mind across the borders, carrying the keys of the haveli on her person all the time, close to her heart



Imagination of the Mother/Female Kin of the Martyr

- According to **Saba Gul Khattak**, who writes about the experiences of Afghan women migrants, when Afghan refugee women talk about coming home, they talk about returning to their ***watan***.
- As a result, the concept of belonging, belonging to a place, and belonging to a community are deeply intertwined with the idea of home.
- Home denotes a way of life, a form of being, and a culture of thought.

Woman and Partition

- The trauma of the Partition drove women out of their houses and the states devised policies to repatriate them through rescue operations.
- There were several memoirs written by women who worked in rescue and recovery during the period.
- **Rameshwari Nehru** visited Thoa Khalsa. In the capacity of a social worker associated with INC, she connected the glory of these pure women with the glory of the pure new nation (which will shape in the pattern of its ancient values). Nehru compared this episode with Queen Padmini's jauhar. Thoa Khalsa comes back in the collective Punjabi memory as an idyllic village site of order and cleanliness.

Woman and Partition

- Women worked at the aid camps, where they received information on the whereabouts of abducted women.
- Urvashi Butalia describes her aunt's experience working in the major recovery effort.
- **Damyanti Sehgal** discusses the challenges experienced in rescuing these women, many of whom were rejected by their families and others who refused to return since they were married to their abductors and, in many cases, had children. They were well aware that their families would never accept them.

Women and Partition

- The question of preserving women's honour even regardless of their lives, choice and quality of living can be problematised
- E.g. **Lajo in Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti*** - the punishment rendered to her after rehabilitation make her an asexual, untouchable "Devi"
- The notion of honour so internalised in her husband, Sunderlal, that he cannot come to accept a defiled Lajo. Similarly, women who were abducted and recovered were denied acceptance and recognition by their kin. Many were goaded to suicide; those that survived after sexual violence were called as cowards.
- Male would protect the community's honour through exerting obsessive control over their body and sexuality.



Women and Partition

- **Mohan Rakesh's Miss Pal** —> A woman locating herself heroically in a society traditionally dominated by kinship norms. She is shown as a product of a generation of female refugees pushed out of the four walls.
- The state support for Partition widows and single women was not adequate in coping with the sheer number of women seeking assistance.
- **Lalithambika Antharjanam's *A Leaf in the Storm*** - Story of an “unattached woman” Jyoti and her emotional and reflective responses and monologues to the baby in her womb, conceived in the stupor of her rape by one of the many aggressors. Her responses help her to shed the gory experiences from the consciousness and make room for warm feelings for her child. The child arouses maternal feelings within her, because of which she finally lays claim over her child.
- Her life's meaning derives from living around her spontaneous maternal instincts. The pregnancy she had earlier abhorred gives her a chance for living afresh. yet, biological reality of pregnancy enables the memory of the rapists.



Women and Partition

- December 6, 1947 - Following independence, governments of India and Pakistan passed a formal Abducted Persons Bill agreeing to set up cooperative recovery operations.
- Dec. 15, 1949 - The Constituent Assembly of India declared that 12,000 women had been recovered in India, and 6000 in Pakistan. Even in the 1990s, there were reports of women still living in the refugee camps, either unclaimed by families or because they refuse or find it impossible to choose a 'home.'
- Decisions being imposed on women raise questions about their agency, resistance and choice.



Women and Partition

- However, the historian should be careful of not abducting a woman's identity further through scholarly intervention, such as interviews. Even the most sensitive and critical scholarship are guilty of appropriating women's resisting voices as symbols of identity for the purpose of research
- When scholars ask about the “true origins”, or ask the victims to “tell stories”, does it amount to re-hijacking of their identity?
- Revealing about one's past would expose a male relation that is currently husband, brother-in-law or neighbour as a former rapist; or the fact that the woman has been raped by someone else before being repatriated to her present family —> there is generally a lot of taboo and discomfort around such narratives
- For a raped/abducted woman, there is no neutral space to return to. Many such women were incorporated in abductor's family and given the status of respected wives and mothers
- **Anne Hardgrove** - “Are our own reified conceptions of ‘identity’ and ‘community’ being mapped when we ask women what side of the border they ‘really’ belong?”



Women and Partition

- **Veena Das'** theory on changed meanings of reproduction and child-bearing during politicisation of identity groups —> women impregnated by other men and give birth to 'wrong' children (Das 1990)
- Abducted Persons Bill did not recognize marriages which had begun in abduction. Children born of such unions were considered illegitimate, so motherhood to a child in these circumstances marked the woman as an outsider
- The state played an indirect paternalistic role in goading the women to terminate unwanted pregnancy - quiet yet coercive ways devised by the state policy in retaining integrity in traumatic situations

Woman and Partition

- When it comes to women's rights during Partition, **Ramachandra Behera** notes that the government created an order under the **Abducted Persons Act** that states that women who have children born in Pakistan must leave them behind.
- In contrast, children born in India must remain in India, inferring that the infant belongs to a father, whether Hindu or Muslim.

Woman and Partition

- Figure of the abducted woman - symbolic of crossing borders, of violating social, cultural and political boundaries.
- During riots and political war/unrest, female sexuality is open to attack and assault
- On the one hand, the aid workers act as the masculine saviour and protector; on the other, the mob's focus on vengeance is mingled with sexual desire
- A woman that is receptacle of communal violence has her position cemented by her age, gender and lack of agency/self-charge
- The act of communal vengeance transcribed on women's body happens through assertion of masculinity and brandishing of aggressive sexuality as a sign of communal power



Woman and Partition

- In India, the upper-caste Hindus have always fixated around the image of the mother and the wife, who play a key role in safeguarding the values of the community.
- On the other hand, as Shelley Feldman notes – growth of Islamization in Pakistan is synonymous with privatization of roles in public arena. In Pakistan, religion plays a paramount role in defining women's identities, and permitting state-sanctioned violence against women.
- E.g. While General Zia-ur Rehman encouraged women's visibility with their participation in the NGOs, her successor General Ershad brought in religious values to weigh on governmental policies, considering women's public visibility as Bangladesh's surrendering to modernization.



Woman and Partition

- Immediate Post-Partition- in many cases, women exercised usual freedom in determining their partners when the national boundaries were in flux
- However, with the hardening of the borders and formation of India and Pakistan, the states took on the role of protector and provider, insisting on determining where a woman and her child belonged
- Pakistan's creation was a loss of India's territory, so with a great urgency, claims were laid on recovering at least the "moveable property" – the women, and this greatly influenced the policies and the process of rehabilitation
- In South Asian context, the nation is the mother, but the state (governmental system) is the father. It can be either benevolent or authoritarian. The government offers protection to women and children, assuming they cannot do it on their own in exchange of controlling women's sexuality.



Thank You

