

The Tragedies of Partition: A Study of Trauma and Suffering of Women in Kirti Jain's Play *Aurkitnetukde*

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Bio: Bhawna Singh is a PhD research scholar in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi, India. The title of her PhD research topic is "Theatre of Resistance: A Study of the Selected Works of Tripurari Sharma". She has published research articles and has also presented papers in various national and international conferences/seminars in her broad subject area in University of Delhi, Aligarh Muslim University, Bangalore University, and University of Central Lancashire, U.K. among others. Her area of interest in research includes a study of post-independence Indian theatre with special focus on women's theatre in India.

Abstract: The tragic event of Indian Partition comprises of stories of trauma and agony leading to numerous narratives occupying a substantial section of literature today. The partition of India on the basis of religious affiliations was the part and parcel of political debates and personal gains which accelerated the pace of restlessness among people of different religions as they readied themselves to be uprooted from their land. This chaotic moment in the history of India had its victims among women and children who were either rendered homeless in the struggle of getting across the border or left stranded, abducted, and becoming victims of honour killings. This event was also responsible for inducing riots as women suffered on both sides of the border through rape, abduction, mutilation, murders and honour killings. Kirti Jain's Hindi play *AurKitneTukde*, based on B. Gowri's script and directed by Jain in 2001, highlights that these riots were mainly based on religious inclinations and women suffered as their bodies became the cultural markers of patriarchy on either side of the border. During the riots occurring in the light of partition, it was considered imperative by the respective heads of the families that their honour be saved by sacrificing the lives of women of their families before they become impure at the hands of a rioter. This paper attempts to highlight the stories of women's suffering and to study the aftermath of partition through *AurKitneTukde* directed by Kirti Jain.

Keywords: Women, Partition, Trauma, Violence, Indian Women's Theatre.

The partition of British India into India and Pakistan engulfs within it the stories of trauma and agony leading to a plethora of narratives occupying a significant section of literature in contemporary times. This cataclysmic event in the history of India is held responsible for major bloodshed and violence inflicted upon men, women, and children who became victims on the margins while people could not get themselves to believe that the nation was on the verge of division and they would be separated from family and friends. The pernicious legacy of partition exists in the form of residues of religious conflicts and political upheavals. The partition of India on the basis of religious affiliations was the part and parcel of political debates and personal gains which accelerated the pace of restlessness among people of different religions as they readied themselves to be uprooted from their land. The events associated with partition comprise

of a violent history of rape, abduction, and murders. This chaotic moment in the history of India had its victims among women and children who were either rendered homeless in the struggle of getting across the border or left stranded, abducted, and becoming victims of honour killings. Women's bodies became the cultural markers of patriarchy on either side of the border as they suffered through rape, abduction, conversion, mutilation, and killings in the guise of maintaining purity and avoiding violation of the family name. Furthermore, The Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act 1949, backfired in ways that women who converted and married were forcefully brought back to their previous families, and in many cases, they were not welcomed on the accounts of violated chastity and ruining their family's honour. AnisKidwai provides an eyewitness account of partition's aftermath in her book *In Freedom's Shade* in which she also mentions instances of courageousness of women who were able to get rid of captivity, while also mentioning the instances of people expressing their anger against women who refused to join their native families because they found freedom in their new homes.

Urvashi Butalia acknowledges that to uncover women's stories from the partition of India, one has to think over and listen to the nuances and the silences which actually hold the truth of women's situation during this important event in the history of India. Women suffered from sexual violation, physical assaults and murder, while several were abducted and passed from one man to another as they tried to cope with the reality of partition and imaging of independent nations. There were several instances when women were chastised and abandoned by their families after they were recovered from their abductors on the account of their violated bodies which would ruin the family name if they were accepted into their household again.

The trauma of partition is portrayed in Kirti Jain's play *AurKitneTukde* (How Many More Fragments?) which was based on B. Gauri's script and inspired from Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from Partition of India*. In the introduction to the play, Kirti Jain explains that to enhance the performance, she made use of "ashurachna" or extemporization which allowed the actors to come forward with different interpretations and experiences every time they improvised the scenes. The meanings would become more and more ambiguous through rehearsals as the performers came with different stories which they heard from their relatives who were familiar with the experiences during the partition of India. These different experiences helped the performers to formulate a different understanding of partition which consisted of comprehending the silenced voices of women who were the major victims of the partition riots. Through the stories of characters Harnam Kaur, Sadiya, Zahida, and Vimla, the play *AurKitneTukde* addresses women's sufferings across the boundaries of religion as they grapple with the reality and the aftermath of partition which has led their lives threadbare amidst the chaos. Hence, this paper attempts to highlight the trauma and sufferings of women in the aftermath of partition through an analysis of *AurKitneTukde* in order to establish a relation between the lived experiences of women and the importance of performance to educate the spectators of the implications of the politicized step of partition of India and Pakistan. This paper attempts to bring into light the significance of cultural memory as utilized by Jain in the play, as well as "the notion of 'woman' as the repository of cultural value" (Menon 29) and her body as the embodiment of communal and national honour in a patriarchal society.

Divided into fourteen scenes, *AurKitneTukde* begins with the story of an abducted Muslim woman Sadiya, who is renamed Sumangala by the mother of her abductor Raghuvir after her

family is brutally killed during the riots following the partition of India. Forced into conversion and marriage, Sumangala is unable to articulate her identity as she fears for her daughter who would be snatched from her arms if she goes back with her brother. Her fear also includes if her brother would accept her at all if he finds out that she is a converted Hindu and no longer pure in his eyes as she has spent a part of her life with a man of another religion. When the police arrive to ask her if she really is Sadiya, she declines and calls herself Sumangala, which becomes the last straw of her fragmented self as she is unable to articulate her identity. Her decision is based on her skepticism if the police would really take her to her brother or use her for their own gains, while also doubting her brother's involvement in her recovery from Raghuvir's house, which ultimately forces her to claim the identity of Sumangala, forced upon her by her violent abductor husband Raghuvir and her mother-in-law.

Vimala's character is partly based on Damyanti Sehgal who went through the terrible events of partition and later became a social worker for the recovery of abducted women. Damyanti Sehgal's accounts of partition are included in Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from Partition of India* wherein she narrates the events from fleeing her home struggling through the ongoing violence around her, to rescuing, recovering, and rehabilitating women and starting endeavours for adult education for women in camps. Vimala's character has major overlaps with Damyanti Sehgal's life, such as fleeing from Kotra, and becoming a social worker and starting adult education for women in rehabilitation camps.

The play depicts the harsh realities of partition when Vimala tells Kamla how she was physically assaulted and gang-raped by men in Amritsar on the train:

VIMALA: ...There were five men standing in front of me with swords in their hands. I tried to hide, just the way a pigeon does when it sees a cat. But pigeons are foolish, Kamala. One of those men came forward and slapped me. The second one pulled my hair, the third held my waist, the fourth one pulled open my legs and the fifth one put the stamp of his masculinity on me...when I tried to retaliate, one of them wounded me, slicing through the most beautiful part of my body. They were fighting for their country to maintain its pride...but it was a celebration of the newly sketched border, Kamala. And the frontier was decorated with women. Our honour was saved, by brutally dishonouring the same honour. (*Aur Kitne Tukde*, Scene V, p. 13) (*Translation is mine*).

However, despite the post-partition agreement, Vimala is left with nowhere to go as she faces rejection from her father and her sister when she beats on their door helplessly to no answers at all. Such was the fate of many women who were rendered homeless after rejection from their families in the aftermath of partition.

The Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act 1949 served as a major obstacle for those women who were happily married and had children in their new homes. While several of them were abducted but later adjusted in their respective new families, there were others who were rescued by men of other religion and later married them. Aili W. Bresnahan argues in 'Censorship as Catalyst for Artistic Innovation' on the issue of recovery and rehabilitation of abducted women, that women's voices went unheard and of no concern to both governments as they carried out the forceful recovery and rehabilitation measures:

The same women who were not protected from abduction in the first place were now again not protected from exportation and their voices went unheard. In both cases, the power of law was either silent where it should have helped or over-reaching when in many cases it was too late to do anything but create fresh heartbreak. (Bresnahan 2014, Pp 10-11)

However, AnisKidwai in her book *In Freedom's Shade* presents the plight of social workers on the allegations of forcing displaced women out of their new homes:

It was up to the government to respond to these allegations. What we did was because of an accord between the governments. How could the implementers be held guilty? We appealed to every section, community, political party, even our Congressi brothers, for help, but let alone the public, even responsible leaders and personalities did not respond. (Kidwai 290).

The forceful recovery of women from their new homes across the border is also portrayed in *AurKitneTukde* through the character of Zahida, who is rescued by Kartar Singh and lives a happily married life with their daughters. When the social worker arrives with the police to take Zahida to Pakistan, she and Kartar Singh protest against it while arguing that Zahida's relatives want to get hold of her property in Pakistan through her. Zahida's pleas go unheard and Kartar Singh promises to come after her to Pakistan. However, when he converts to Islam and goes to the court, Zahida promptly denies of any acquaintance with him and replies that she is a married woman and that she should be left alone. Zahida and Kartar Singh's story runs parallel to the legend of Zainab and Buta Singh, who had gone through the same fate and Buta Singh committed suicide by throwing himself under the train the next day. While Buta Singh may have become a hero in the eyes of people, Zainab's perspective of the story remains ambiguous. *AurKitneTukde* attempts to present Zainab/Zahida's answer at the end of the play wherein she presents her plight, having lost her sense of self after repeated attempts of being raped and passed from one man to another, and the partition of nation which concluded into the partition of her body and psyche.

During the events of partition, the nation witnessed families slaughtering wives, daughters and mothers so that they would not be in the danger of being mutilated and violated by men of other religion, which brings into light a pertinent issue, that is, a woman's body as the embodiment of communal and national honour in a patriarchal society. A major instance exemplary of such measures taken by families is from ThoaKhalsa, Rawalpindi district where women of several families took their lives by committing mass suicide by jumping into a well in order to save themselves from getting violated by the rioters of other religion. Urvashi Butalia mentions the news from *The Statesman*, April 15, 1947, which cites the incident as an example of reviving "the Rajput tradition of self-immolation" (Butalia 196) to save their honour by sacrificing themselves and their children through the mass suicide. However, in the same incident, the number of bodies eventually resulted in a shortage of water in the well to drown all the bodies; hence some of them survived even after repeated attempts. One such survivor was Basant Kaur who survived the mass suicide in ThoaKhalsa, and *AurKitneTukde* relates her story through the character of Harnam Kaur. Harnam's story is deeply embedded in feelings of guilt and shame over her life as she copes with her son's disapproving outlook on her survival amongst other women who took their lives and became martyrs. The reader/spectator is left aghast while witnessing the scene where men are slitting the throats of their daughters while

Harnamscreams in pain when her daughter Mann Kaur is killed in front of her by Sardar Vir Singh, who proclaims that the nation would be proud of this deed of martyrdom. When her son Jeet expresses his approval on Mann's willful sacrifice for nation's pride, Harnam exclaims:

HARNAM: Ha haha, everyone says it was done according to women's consent. As if they become "sati" there. Did they really want to die? Then why did Banto hide her earrings in her dupatta, and Billo tied some money with her before jumping into the well? (*AurKitneTukde*, Scene XII, p. 19) (Translation is mine).

Women's bodies become the cultural repository for patriarchy which presumes itself as the guardian and protector where men take up the role to protect the honour, for the women are essentially spoken for, and it is a common perception perpetuated by patriarchy that women are unable to protect themselves. Therefore, during the riots occurring in the light of partition, it was considered imperative that the communal and national honour be saved by sacrificing the lives of women of their families before they become impure at the hands of a rioter of different religion through abduction, conversion, rape, and marriage. This is reflected in the way abducted women and those who "sacrificed" themselves were perceived differently wherein the former maligned the honour while the latter became the epitome of martyrdom. During the implementation of The Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act 1949, the deaths of women who sacrificed themselves remained unreported as the families knew that they were responsible for it. While the abducted women became a symbol of shame and impurity for several families, those women who were killed for honour became the embodiment of martyrdom. *AurKitneTukde's* Harnam Kaur falls into the former category, reprimanded by her son for surviving and putting on sake their community's honour.

The horrific experiences of partition consist of the tragedies inflicted upon the lives of countless women amidst the chaos which has acquired nuances and layers over the years. Through *AurKitneTukde*, B. Gauri and Kirti Jain convey the cultural memory of partition through the art of theatre by portraying the experiences of women whose voice remained silent or passive in the historical narratives. Women's bodies became the symbolic land on which overzealous men waged wars deeply rooted in politics and religion. This play attempts to weave the cultural memory of spectator/reader and performers in order to bring forward a narrative of the partition to present its effect on women's bodies and psyche through performance. *AurKitneTukde's* expressive power lies in the manner it enables the spectator/reader to perceive the trauma of partition mediated with layers of experiences to portray women's stories of homelessness and displaced identity, and present the ways in which women's bodies become the cultural markers of a patriarchal society.

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