



Partition: Love & Hate in *Waris Shah Nu*

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Abstract— This paper will explore the trauma of partition and the destruction of a valued way of life as expressed by Amrita Pritam in her Punjabi poem *Waris Shah Nu*. It becomes imperative to look at literature, either celebrating Independence, or the tragedy of Partition, by foregrounding this human cost. The poem makes a connection between the individual tragedy and the collective trauma that marks the Partition.

Keywords— displacement, identity, partition, trauma



I. INTRODUCTION

In his “Tryst with Destiny” speech, given in Parliament on the eve of independence, Nehru said “At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom”. These words have been the guiding principles in the making of modern India. However, the moment of independence was not without its trauma. A study of the census data of 1931 and 1951 reveals that “within four years of partition 14.5 million people migrated into India, Pakistan...Bangladesh” and was accompanied by an “outflow” of approximately “17.9 million during the same period” (Bharadwaj, Khwaja & Mian, 2008, p. 1). At the national level, while 7.3 million migrants entered India, approximately 9.6 million moved out (Bharadwaj et al., 2008, p. 6). A comparative study of the migration of people reveals that “3.4 million people were “missing” or unaccounted for” (Bharadwaj et al., 2008, p. 1) and “likely reflect the mortality during partition” (Bharadwaj et al., 2008, p. 7).

The situation on the western frontier of India, modern-day Punjab, was truly horrifying. Contrary to claims by Lord Mountbatten that “only 200,000 were killed”, the governor of West Punjab, Sir Francis Mudie, estimated that “500,000 Muslims had died trying to enter his province”, and the British High Commissioner in Karachi put the total figure at 800,000 (James, 1998, p. 636). Approximately 1.26 million Muslims left, what is modern day Punjab, and never arrived in Pakistan. The

Hindu/Sikh causality figure along the border is approximately 0.84 million. These are frightening statistics: even as the country celebrated Independence large swathes of the population was either being mowed down or being driven out of ancestral lands into life as a rootless migrant. They paint a grim picture of the decimation of the social, cultural and economic life of communities along the border.

II. AMRITA PRITAM & THE PARTITION

The partition of India was a defining moment in Amrita Pritam’s poetic consciousness. In an interview she gave to *Mehfil*, she said

As for direct influences, I can say that the partition of our country had a great influence on my writing. At the period when I saw the suffering of thousands and thousands of people, especially women because they suffered in a special way, I was very moved.... I also wrote a number of poems.....These poems have been read in Pakistan and in India... because of the genuine pain I express in them.

(Coppola, 1968, p.7)

Writing about the role of religion the partition Amrita Pritam wrote “I saw, heard and read about so many atrocities committed in the name of religion that turned me against any kind of religion and revolution” (Hassan, 1998,

p. 2662). *Waris Shah Nu* is an indictment of the political and religious leadership of the country.

The experience of Independence along the western border is intricately linked with the trauma of displacement it caused. Amrita Pritam was born in Gujranwala, Pakistan in 1919. *Waris Shah Nu (To Waris Shah)* employs the legend of Heer-Ranjha to reflect the pain and trauma of partition. Waris Shah was a Sufi poet who composed the poem *Heer Ranjha* in 1766. The song employs the tropes of the failed lovers to poignantly describe the duos doomed love. Caste and class divide the two lovers: Heer belongs to a wealthy Sial family, while Ranjha was the youngest son of Jat farmers. Heer's maternal uncle, Kaidos, discovers that the lovers have been meeting in secret betrays them to the family. Heer's brutal murder at the hands of her own family is predicated on a medieval construction of honour. Her love for Ranjha is a transgression that needs to be suppressed. The story both celebrates love and serves as a warning against 'transgressive' notions of affection.

Amrita Pritam's use of this story in her own poem is revelatory. The lovers were doomed not because they were unfaithful, but because the family charged with loving, respecting and protecting them, turned on the duo with extreme violence. Seen in light of the violence of the partition, this violence prefigures the rage with which village members turned on each other and mowed each other down, simply because of differing religious identities. Like elders in a family, religious and political leaders play an important role in the public and political life of a society. The poem is a sharp indictment of these groups: instead placating the ire of groups and individuals in the villages of Punjab, they fanned the flames of hatred. She calls them "Kaido" after Heer's treacherous maternal uncle. Thus, the elders, instead of protecting the life and the innocence of the young, indulged in a bloodbath. The references are an indictment of political leaders who in their rush for power, Ajit Bhattacharjea states were "unaware and uncaring of the human cost of cutting a border through the heart of populous provinces" (p. 2662).

References to Waris Shah and his great work imply that the events in *Heer Ranjha* prefigure the events in Amrita Pritam's own work. Just as the two lovers spent a blissful childhood and youth wandering the fields of Punjab, so did the youth of early 20th century Punjab. Neither was cognisant of the brutality that lingered beneath the placid surface. Villages are close knit communities with ties that span generations. In *Waris shah Nu*, Amrita Pritam creates an image of the pre- and post- partition village in Punjab. She writes that just like the lovers of yore, young men and women would roam the fields, play the flute, and enjoy the swings. However, the Partition wreaked havoc on the

village: the fields where young men would work are now littered with their dead and rotting bodies. Tragically they have been killed not by strangers, but by their neighbours simply because they belonged to different religious groups. The poem gives a poignant image of the young women left behind to mourn the dead. Killing young men and leaving behind vulnerable women is a historical reality which resulted in countless rapes and suicides. Even before the partition the atmosphere had become so vicious that parents were hesitant in letting their daughters venture into the public. This idea of impending doom is present in the love story of Heer Ranjha as well when the poet mentions Heer getting married. Instead of a blissful life it foretells a life of pain and denial. Tragically the sounds of the youth, merrymaking and fealty become transformed into an eerie silence broken only by the lamentations of those left behind.

This pain is foregrounded in the poem when the poet questions the lack activities young women, performed by the women, in usual circumstances. She draws poignant picture of the broken lives left behind when she mentions girls crying over dead lovers, separated from friends they would never see again and burying the endless dead. The words "Friends parted from one another" (Pritam, 1968, p. 28) reflects that fact that symbolic and the emotional trauma of the partition has been carried by women as a social group and has incapacitated them. Separation is an integral part of women's lives in the subcontinent: they know that they will inevitably leave the familiar to go to their marital homes. The relationships they form with their friends are precious precisely because they are temporary. When these young girls cry over these destroyed friendships they are also crying at the manner of the loss: many of these young girls were kidnapped, raped, and killed; often they were killed by their own families in an effort to protect the family honour. It was only in the luckiest circumstances that these young girls could safely make their way to the "right" side of the border without suffering any indignity. Amrita Pritam points out to a bitter fact of partition: the male body was annihilated, the female body suffered through repeated acts violation. The separation of young girls from their bosom friends, and tales of torture and rape resulted in its own psychological trauma.

The violence of the narrative is a performance of power. At the same time the collective nature of the trauma is a wound to the collective social identity. "The village square heaped with corpses,/ The Chenab flooded with blood" is a performance of power. The narrator is stunned at the violence she is witnessing. The poem raises essential question about the notions of identity, ethnicity and belonging. What constitutes a nation, and how do a people overcome a national trauma like the partition. More importantly whose trauma is it: there has been no national

conversation about the deaths and rapes that accompanied Independence. It is important to note that cultural trauma becomes traumatic not only because of its violent nature. Events become traumatic when they damage the structures that underpin notions that constitute the collective and notions of identity. (Eyerman, 2011, p. 258). The poem underlines the fact that the violence of the partition is also indicative of the rupture in Hindu-Muslim syncretic culture. The poem is an investigation into identity, ethnicity and belonging. The poet is attempting to negotiate between “cultural trauma and collective identity” (Eyerman, 2011, p. 111).

The reference that “all the people have become Kaidos” is indicative of an interesting facet of trauma: while the damage is done to an individual, the impact of the event is understood in a collective. In other words, the “threat to the collective” rather than to the individual becomes a marker of the trauma (pp. xii). The poet also traces the annihilation of an old way of life: there is no one left to sing the songs of festivities, perform the daily tasks that mark women’s lives: spinning, singing, gossiping in the village square. The public spaces where these women considered themselves safe now witness their violation. This loss of an idyllic past is conveyed through by the image of the flute. *Heer Ranjha* mentions that it was Ranjha’s skills with the flute that first attracted Heer. The relationship of the lovers mirrors the devotion Waris Shah felt for Krishna. True love resulting in a communion with the divine is a central idea of Sufi and Bhakti poetry. In *Heer Ranjha*, Waris Shah employs this idea to place himself in the position of Heer: he is the devotee who is blissfully immersed in the love of the divine Krishna even if it means his own annihilation. In fact, this erasure of the self is to be celebrated since it leads to a higher level of consciousness. It is in this way that the poem becomes a great love story and a celebration of piety. In addition to this, Krishna was a flautist whose playing would enamour Radha so much that she would forget her chores and responsibilities and listen to him endlessly. This idea of piety resulting in forgetting one’s material surroundings finds its apotheosis in the figure of Meera. In her songs she herself says

Mere to Girdhar Gopal, doosra na koi

(I only know Girdhar Gopal [Krishna], and no one else)

(My translation)

In *Waris Shah Nu* Amrita Pritam presents the consequences the perversion this piety: the reed used to make the flute transforms into a snake. According to legend, the sound of Krishna’s flute seduced the listener; similarly, it was Ranjha’s playing of the flute that first attracted Heer. The process of articulation is important: words create reality. It was the emotions of love, of Krishna and Ranjha,

in the two stories, that spread this emotion in whoever heard their music. Similarly, in the early 20th century the debates regarding the two-nation theory, separate electorates according to religion were spreading a slow poison in rural communities in Punjab. The partition served as kindling and started a fire that swept through the entire state. It left behind a trail of death, blood and decay. The playing of the flute is the act of articulation.

The poem end with a desperate call for normalcy: the narrator presents the young girls crying over graves asking for the return of Waris Shah. They, and the narrator, urge the dead poet to return and write another great tragic love song signalling return to normalcy. The desire is revealing: even as they wish for things to return to what they once were, the very invocation of Waris Shah, and through him of the conclusion of the story of Heer Ranjha, imply that the speakers know that the past is irrevocably lost. The loss of innocence is complete and irreversible. The conclusion of the poem then becomes the cry of countless women facing the trauma of partition: they recognise that they will carry the scars for life. Since the land is the mother that feeds and clothes us, and this land has been drenched in blood and religious poison has seeped into its very marrows, the poem is also a recognition go the fact the wounds of the past will haunt future generations. The scars of the partition have left a lasting impact in the morality and materiality of the women’s lives.

Women in the subcontinent carry with them the cultural memory of this violence and mourning. This impacts their interaction with the world around them as well as the tenuous bonds of female rapport. An insecure and unstable womanhood will raise diffident and volatile generations incapable of creating alliances and bonds of comradeship. This in turn will form an unstable nation incapable of withstanding challenges. It is for this reason that the silences ‘speak’ and that the lamentations be ‘heard’. These are the prerequisites of healing and regeneration.

III. CONCLUSION

Amrita Pritam’s poem gives voice to the trauma of the countless women who faced horrendous crimes in the backdrop of the Partition of India. More importantly, it foregrounds the deliberate and conscious silencing of the female experience by the mainstream narrative. The unacknowledged experience of girls and women at the moment of the creation of the nation raises questions on the degree to which these voices would find expression as the new country progressed and came into its own. The silencing of women’s voices in public spaces and later their lamentations to Waris Shah echo through time and

addressing them is imperative for the project of nation building.

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