



Identity Crisis in Bedi's "Lajwanti": An Exploration of Cultural Trauma through Gendered Violence

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Abstract

The Partition of India unlocked religious and communal violence throughout the country, leaving unspeakable agony and a legacy of colonialism for the tormented survivors and their descendants. This cataclysmic event compelled it to pay the price for its independence by tearing its own motherland's breast into two parts. The parted earth's stayers and their progenies have not yet been emancipated from the anguish of division due to the shadow of trauma. During this time, mostly women were sexually used and abused to destroy the enemy's power and respect since they were the biological reproducers of the collectivity and transmitters of its culture. Researchers generally focus on the visible reasons to calculate the damage caused by the conflict. However, they ignore how socially constructed subject matters also play a significant role in deteriorating the situation of women. Against this backdrop, this paper explores how the protagonist of Bedi's story, "Lajwanti", experiences an identity crisis due to the socially constructed truth and double-yoked gendered and communal violence during the partition and post-partition period. It examines the literary text through the lens of cultural trauma as a theoretical tool based on the central characters' traumatic experiences endowed by the society, the violence inflicted on the female bodies, sexuality by the opposite religious groups, and identity crisis in the primary character of the story. This study reveals that socially interceded truth frolics in damaging the victimized women's honor more than the heinous act of sexual violence in the conflict. It helps to comprehend how the unproductive

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human clash of the diverse religious groups affected by communally fabricated truth creates great trouble with an identity crisis for the victims.

Keywords: *Gendered violence, abduction, rape, partition, cultural trauma, identity*

Introduction

One of the most remarkable and catastrophic events in the history of the Indian subcontinent, i.e. partition of India, has caused unspeakable pain and suffering to the victims. In the wake of this cataclysmic event, prominent writers were inspired to express their experiences in literary works. The partition literature inscribed during this period narrates how the Britishers' 'Divide and Rule' principle and the religious group's communal and self-centered mindset played a significant role in exploding enmity, creating a horrifying milieu amidst the fraternity. Those literary texts have reflected human suffering, framing vivid pictures of an inhuman world of hatred, rage, self-interest, and turmoil. Talking about the writers of partition stories, Alok Bhalla states, "The partition stories are rather witnessed to a period in which we fell out of a human world of languages, customs, rituals, and prayers into a bestial world of hatred, rage, self-interest, and frenzy (p. 3124)." Since literature is taken as a mirror of society, Bhalla has rightly claimed that partition stories are like eyewitness accounts that describe the tale of human fall into the world of cruelty and inhumanity. The division of India-Pakistan is an event of such magnitude that its reverberation is felt even today. Studying the consequences and root causes of this event, which remain relevant today, can provide valuable insights into potential chaos and disruption in society.

Rajinder Singh Bedi, an Indian Urdu author of the progressive writers' movement and film director, has significantly contributed to society through his writings and notable films with life-changing messages. Being famously known for "disturbing' Partition of India tales," (The Times of India, 2005) he uses his amazing skill of playing words to frame the historical truth in his creations as a witness to the bestial world full of hatred, cruelty, and turmoil. Among his beautiful writings, *Lajawati*, an Urdu short story translated into English by Alok Bhalla, is a solid example of how the brutality of war and socially mediated truth create a traumatic situation and force blameless people, especially women, to suffer a lot, losing their identity. The moving tale, outlined against the backdrop of communal conflict, depicts the reality of that period.

“Lajwanti” narrates the tear-jerking story of the young couple, Lajwanti and her abusive husband, Sunderlal. It reveals the tragic situation of victims caused by the brutality of the religious tumult in the wake of the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Being abducted but well treated even by the enemy assemblage, Lajwanti succeeds in coming back through the recovery process to join her family and society after a long period. However, she remained stuck in a great dilemma when her family and community did not accept her freely with pure love and affection due to doubts about her chastity. Though she was not involved in making the situation worse, she had to bear more suffering due to the worst condition. Masculine attitudes imposed by the so-called regressive thoughts and outdated social codes worsen her position more than previously by treating her as a mute object and nothing more than the property of patriarchal society. Social agents invisibly frisked their significant role to exacerbate the problem for her. Neither Lajwanti could be restored to her family, having honor and love, nor could the community let Sunderlal be free from reverting thoughts and accept his beloved wife respectfully. Both of their pathetic situations in the story represent the picturesque communal devastation throughout the conflict. Hindu-Muslim religion is not brought to doom the nation in this story, but the social fabric with the political turmoil is the culminating point in forming this story.

Since the present paper aims to assess the story, “Lajwanti”, in the light of cultural trauma through gendered violence, it analyzes the text based on the critical insights from the theorists, critics, textual evidence, and other relevant proofs from books, articles, journals, critically examined essays, and even opinions shared in interviews in different media. The study focuses on the highly traumatic experience of women caught amid the double-yoked violence of communal hatred on the one hand and patriarchy on the other.

Cultural Trauma as a Theoretical Lens

To comprehend the text vividly from the perspective of cultural trauma theory is relevant to highlighting some significant ideas to diagnose how much violence against women was triggered to traumatize them during the separation period. First, cultural trauma is not born but made through socially mediated processes that emerge when groups endure dreadful events that forever change their consciousness and identity. This trauma arises out of the shock to the routine. Ron Eyerman asserts, “It highlights how collective suffering is meaningfully manifested through the processes of articulation and representation and the mediating factors of power and access” (p.37). Furthermore, he clarifies, “Cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric affecting a group of people that have

achieved some degree of cohesion” (p.2). In this sense, it traverses in diverse ways with culture, history, race, gender, location, language, creed, and dawdles accordingly on the souls of the people and their offspring. Consequently, many people in the same community may experience higher or lower mental and physical sickness rates, substance abuse, and erosion in families and community structures. And this is precisely what cultural trauma talks about. Additionally, making clear about it, Jeffery C. Alexander claims, “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (p.1). The definition clarifies that cultural trauma has five significant interwoven elements, such as a horrendous event, collective feeling, and indelible marks left upon the group consciousness, influencing the memories and future identity.

Thus, the emergence of cultural trauma is conditioned by several aspects, such as incident timing, political context, how authority was performed, the content of mass media representations, and the presence, power, and performance of carrier groups (Eyerman, 2019, p. 39). Its upshot depends on the interplay of all those factors. Understanding cultural trauma means understanding how to find solutions to the group’s suffering. Using this theoretical lens and language developed by cultural trauma theorists, it becomes helpful to trace the victims’ trauma and resolve it over time without letting the snags worsen. And applying this theory as a gismo is equally essential and helpful for the researcher to diagnose the literary manners of the characters and behaviors for the broader study.

The Allegorical Meaning of the Title and Song

Traumatic experiences via epoch-making characters of the story are exposed precisely and succinctly within one line of the Punjabi folk song- “Do not touch Lajwanti, for she will curl up and die (Bedi, 2007, p. 21).” The tactfully mentioned song at the beginning of the tale arouses a heart-rending emotion in the readers’ minds. It successfully captures their attention until the end of the story. Playing stunningly with rhetoric and diction, the author compels the readers to feel sympathy and empathy towards the suffering of the characters in the narrative. The short story “Lajwanti” unfolds numerous horrendous hurdles experienced by the victims during that historical moment. And this song has effectively disclosed a social stigma about the abducted women during the partition. The obvious connotative meaning implies that Lajwanti, after being captured and physically abused by the enemy groups, is converted into a fragile, ostracized woman; likewise, the touch-me-not plant named Lajwanti has a unique quality of

curling its leaves when it is touched or brushed. Jill Didur observes, “The plant is popularly named Lajwanti because its curling action has been seen as indicative of shyness or shame, hence the root '*laaj*' which refers to shame (p. 60).” The analogy between humans and the plant expressed in the song reveals how Lajwant has suffered through masculine torture. She shrinks to indicate that she has no wish to let her body touch again in the same violent manner. If it is done so, she will be withered forever by that manly touch. She does not even have the strength to resist the simple blow of humiliation and embarrassment after being battered in the communal conflict. How the horrific event torments her can be felt clearly in Sunderlal’s action and pleading with the people of society in the succeeding lines:

He would spend long hours pleading with people to take such women back into their homes, to give them the respect due a mother, daughter, sister, or wife . . . never remind them, either by word or gesture, of the humiliations they have suffered; don’t ever reopen their wounds. They are gentle and fragile like the leaves of the Lajwanti. . .

If you touch them, they will curl up and die . . . (Bedi, 2007, p. 22)

This pathetic appeal made by Sunderlal compels us to speculate about the miserable plight of his beloved wife. The horrendous event had transformed his I and innocent spouse into the delicate leaves of the Lajwanti plant. The malicious masculine hand had subjugated her frail body in such a way that even a simple gesture from a human being feels like an impending death. She had been tortured too much, because of which even words of mortification reopen her festering lesions and compel her to be emaciated forever. Lajwanti, a representative character for all those maltreated females, shows how women became the victims of spiteful and heinous acts of males. Thus, stimulating readers’ minds, the writer has used the song artfully in his story to depict the grief the victims have experienced in their lives.

Ambivalent Attitudes of the Patriarchal Society

Besides the song’s apparent connotative meaning, it also flings ambivalent implications for the rehabilitation committee and community. Whatever the song’s meaning is deduced, it ultimately intensifies the traumatic circumstances of the sufferers. The indecisive interpretation of Lajwanti’s curling action reverberates with the community’s ambiguous response to the return of womanhood. Though Sunderlal, elected as a secretary of one rehabilitation committee, advocates the open-hearted welcome of the abducted women in their homes, the orthodox temple priest Narain Baba ignores his pleading. The slogan of this programme for the rehabilitation of women who had been kidnapped and raped, “Honor them. Give them a place in your hearts” (Bedi, 2007, p. 21). Becomes meaningless when priests,

who usually claim themselves as the messenger of God, oppose this sacred social job. The story narrates, “This programme was opposed by the priests of Narain Baba’s temple and by all those good and orthodox people who lived in its vicinity” (Bedi, 2007, p. 21). The priests of Narain Baba’s temple and others opposed the program to reinstate the maltreated women because their conceptualized masculine meaning says that the abducted females are sexually contaminated, and they have no respectful right to be restored to their families or society. Cultural trauma theorist Ron Eyerman claims that cultural traumas are not born but made. They are socially mediated processes. Likewise, a well-known Indian feminist activist and author, Kamla Bhasin, also claims that women’s honor is constructed in relation to their genital organs in a male-dominated society. Giving an interview in the famous Bollywood actor Aamir Khan’s program named *Satyamev Jayate*, season three, episode six, broadcast on the ‘Star World’ channel, Bhasin says:

Suppose I am raped, people say, I lost my honor. How did I lose my honor? Who has kept my honor in my vagina? It is a patriarchal idea that my rape will defile the honor of my community. I’d like to tell all Indians, “Why did you place your community’s honor in a woman’s vagina?” We never did that. It’s the rapist who loses his honor, we don’t. (12:40–13:25)

As Kamla Bhasin argues, rape does not strip women of honor; rather, it is the rapist who forfeits his moral standing. Bhasin challenges patriarchal notions of honor by arguing that rape does not defile women but exposes the moral failure of the perpetrator. Her assertive comment on masculinity clarifies how forceful discriminative meaning is generated, because of which the women turn into mute objects. Their bodies, lives, and freedom are controlled and directed by patriarchal society. In the same manner, here, in the story as well, meaning is being constructed through social agents. According to the cultural trauma theory, the priests and other orthodox people are “the collective agents of the trauma process” (Alexander, 2004, p.11). These carrier groups construct the gender-based meaning about the perpetrated womankind and convey the message to the other members of a collectivity. These social agents can emerge from different parts of the social structure. Amongst many social agents like elites or denigrated and marginalized classes, the priests of Narain Baba temple are from the “prestigious religious leaders or groups whom the majority has designated as spiritual pariahs” (Alexander, 2004, p.11). Using the power and position, they are generating “the public discourse about the meaning of the routine harm” (Alexander, 2004, p.11). With its help, they are creating the truth about the victimized women, which ultimately increases the upsetting situation among them. Though the victimized women were rescued, the socially constructed interpretation hinders

them to be reinstated into society. This unsure attitude of the family and community amplifies the anxiety of abducted women, including Lajwanti.

In addition, the patriarchal rules compel the relatives to be ruder and harsher in excavating the victims' wounds. Their refusal to recognize and accept their women during the reunification was weird and frustrating. Seeing sexually beleaguered women by the opponent cluster, they, especially males, feel their masculine power is weakened, the community's identity is threatened, and the nation's pride is defeated. Ruth Seifert explains how the monstrous act of rape destroys the community's honor:

The female body is a symbolic representation of body politic . . . meaning is denoted by the female gender, "on whose person, body, and life the construction of the community...the violence inflicted on women is aimed at the physical and personal integrity of a group . . . the rape of the women in a community can be regarded as the symbolic rape of the body of this community . . . (Ruth, 1994, pp. 63-64)

Being one of the most vulnerable groups in society, women's bodies always remain the major target of the enemy to destroy vis-à-vis power and respect. The conflicted group also sees their females, who are biological producers of collectivity, markers of national and religious pride, are destroyed and harassed. Here in the story as well, they feel shame and humiliation and are numbed by patriarchal thoughts. Instead of helping and accepting their women, they remained there as strangers, being paralyzed by the male-dominated constructed principles. Furthermore, the acrimonious comments made by the relatives and villagers accentuate the agony of the victims. They coerce the perpetrators to embrace death to avoid sexual violence against them to shield their chastity as well as the family and community's honor. Instead of getting love and care, they are treated once again inhuman and uncivilized manner. It is like adding fuel to the fire for them. To be abducted and raped is a horrendous event itself, but it is not as bad as they are making it deathlike snake pit. Showing such mean attitudes to the sufferers based on gender is also violence against women. According to a fact sheet from the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations (UN) defines violence against women as:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (World Health Organization, 2021).

The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies violence against women as any gender-based act that causes physical, sexual, or mental harm. This violence, often regarded as a hate crime, inflicts profound suffering on women and girls. Social agents, through negative

attitudes and behaviors, exacerbate this suffering, anxiety and traumatic experience of ill-treated women. This reinforces trauma and highlights the urgent need for societal change to protect and support victims.

Impact of Horrendous Event on the Victim's Life and Future Identity

The trepidation and distressing experiences are not only augmented in the assaulted females but also hamper the lives of the whole society. The story's opening paragraph clarifies how the widely used manly propensity for taking vengeance compels the whole society to fall into deep sorrow. It narrates, "The carnage of the Partition was at last over. Thousands of people joined hands, washed the blood off their bodies, and turned their attention to those who had not been physically mutilated, but whose lives had been shattered, and souls had been scarred" (Bedi, 2007, p. 21). It states that the people should not be directly involved in the vicious events to be traumatized; any member of their group's traumatic experience becomes sufficient to hamper the rest of the members of the same cluster. Sunderlal's respectful feelings towards the perpetrated womenfolk and unfathomable anguish in his heart give concrete evidence of it. Sunderlal, who never participated in the riots, is deeply affected by the communal clash. His love and respect for his beloved wife and anger for society can be felt in his evocative lines as follows:

If I ever find her again, if I ever again do...I shall honour her and give her a place in my heart...I shall tell everyone that the women who were abducted are innocent. They are victims of the brutality and the rapacity of the rioters...A society that refuses to accept them back, that does not rehabilitate them...is a rotten, foul society, which should be destroyed... (Bedi, 2007, p. 22)

Being overwhelmed by the song about Lajwanti hummed by the processionists in the morning, Sunderlal wishes to meet his beloved wife and honor her in his heart. He expresses his anger by saying foul society should be destroyed if it does not rehabilitate the victimized women with love and care. Like the way cultural trauma theory clarifies that degrees of soreness vary from person to person, culture to culture, the depth of his pain differs from others while singing a folk song every morning, leading a procession through the city's streets. The narrative says:

Whenever they started singing, "Do not touch lajwanti /for she will curl up/and die," Sunderlal's voice would begin to choke with tears. He would continue to follow the procession in silence and wonder about Lajwanti's fate: "Where is she now, how is she, does she ever think of me, will I ever see her again?" As he walked on the hard and stony streets, his steps would falter. (Bedi, 2007, p. 21)

Choking with tears, being unable to sing the song with others, losing oneself deep in imagination, thinking about his wife, and faltering legs prove how much deep pain he has been going through compared to others. In Ron Eyerman's words, the cultural trauma theory line is suitable to quote here. It says:

A wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion (p. 61).

Since the depth of the pain varies from person to person, his pain also differs from others. Sunderlal's pleading with people to arouse positive vibes in them and his great effort for unifying the sufferers and their relatives through the medium of the Rehabilitation Committee give sufficient evidence to claim how much he has suffered. He also regrets the mistreatment of his wife before the partition. But now everything has changed, and he is ready to worship his wife, keeping her in a goddess position to rebuild and save his lost honor.

Likewise, Sunderlal seeks to save honor from an individual level; both newly parted nations, India and Pakistan, also began to reclaim their women from an enemy nation as a matter of national honor. The voices were echoed for the recovery of so-called abducted women as a 'public discourse'. This discourse certifies that abducted females are the objects of national glory. To patch up the 'torn honor' through the Rehabilitation Committee, both nations passed the "Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act between India and Pakistan in 1949. This one is a suitable medium for healing the sufferers' wounds and forgetting in times of restoring normality. But the reunion between Sunderlal and Lajwanti was shocking. Sunderlal was surprised to see his wife with a radiant look, a fair complexion, bright, sparkling eyes, and a healthy body. The hidden reason behind this shock was hegemonic masculinity, which also carries the notion that women are expected to look pale with messy hair, torn clothes, and debilitating physical conditions due to malnutrition, unhappiness, and no strength left in them. Besides all these, both resume their life again, hoping to kindle new vibes in their life, but Sunderlal's hidden manly nature does not let him listen to her rancorous experiences. Because of her husband's changed manner and behavior, she becomes unable to cope with his unexpected honor and love displayed towards her. Unpredicted high adoration and celestial veneration oblige her to fall into confusion about her status or identity.

All inhuman activities during the partition period, like sexual violence and unexpected behavior from enemies and family members, brought an identity crisis for offended womenfolk. The varied sexual violence inflicted upon women forces them to commit suicide or live dishonored lives with a new identity as polluted women. Some of them find themselves in a

dilemma about their individuality. They feel as if they have lost their identity. Lajwanti is a crystal-clear example of it. After being rescued, “he [enshrines] her like a golden idol in the temple of his heart and [guards] her like a jealous devotee” (Bedi, 2007, pp. 30-31). Lots of love and respect showered by her husband assisted her in flourishing and blooming. Being addressed as a Devi or goddess by her hubby multiplies her joy and satisfaction. But after realizing that her traumatic experiences are not being listened to, her unclean, heavy mind and heart force her to be isolated from her mate. She is compelled to remain silent, locking up all her sorrows in her breast. Silently done masculine domestic violence upon her germinates lots of questions in her mind about her identity. Since the partition, her body no longer belonged to her but to the body of the goddess. She remained no simpler and naiver than Lajo. Her original identity is replaced by another new one, i.e., *Devi*. But she is perturbed that the current pleasant situation, which seems like a dream world for her, can be shattered at any time by those masculine codes. Her newly created identity is under erasure. Though she is now in the center as a goddess, she can be marginalized in no time by the machismo. Despite love, huge respect, and freedom, she remains agitated. She wants to be Lajo again to regain all those beautiful bygone days in which beauty and innocence were hidden, even in the conjugal fighting. The narrative says:

She wanted to be Lajo again, the woman who could quarrel with her husband over something trivial ... that she would shatter at the slightest touch ... she began to gaze at herself in the mirror and [deduced] that she would never be Lajo again. She had returned home, but she had lost everything. (Bedi, 2007, pp. 30-31)

The story says that Lajo, once very strong enough to tolerate domestic violence, is now converted into valuable but breakable glass. It connotes the meaning that her newly established identity can be smashed at any time by the slightest blow of masculine attitudes. Falling into this kind of situation is very painful and problematic for her. Neither can she regain her original identity nor celebrate her new personality with full enthusiasm. Now the big question mark arises over here, “Who is she? ‘Lajo’ (old identity) or ‘Devi’ (the newer one)?” She is absolutely in confusion. Both identities are of no use to her. This is how trauma theorists say that horrendous events force “[change the victims’] future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 1). In the story, the atrocious event causes her to lose her old personality, which is replaced by the newer one. The newly constructed identity for her is like the Sword of Damocles hanging over her head, which may fall at any time and destroy everything. This terrible and pathetic situation clarifies that she is in a critical stage of an identity crisis.

Conclusion

Thus, during the Partition period, rival groups descended to the lowest levels of violence in their attempt to destroy each other's power, respect, and collective identity. By abusing the flimsy bodies of women from the opposing community, men felt victorious over the enemy assemblage, if such acts morally degraded the rival group. Energized by this virile and erroneous mentality, they ignited animosity that shattered bonds of camaraderie, love, and peace, turning the violence of Partition into an abysmal trauma for entire communities. Within this context, the egoistic masculine attitudes of so-called religious groups, the rude and conditional behavior of one's own relatives, and the ambivalent character of the nation together generate a painful crisis of identity for Lajwanti. Though she survives the violence, her survival does not restore her sense of self; instead, it traps her in a paradox of belonging where she is revered as a symbol of honor yet denied recognition as a suffering individual. Caught between social acceptance and emotional silencing, Lajwanti ultimately finds herself belonging nowhere, inhabiting a painful liminal space in which cultural trauma fractures her identity, rendering her present everywhere as a moral emblem but absent everywhere as a person.

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