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**Rajinder Singh Bedi's Lajwanti: Reinscribing Sita on the Borders of Breaking India**

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**Abstract:**

Women have always been subjected to humiliation, suffering and torture under the hegemonic dominance of patriarchy in multiple ways. The occurrences of bigger historical events like war, partition, pandemic etc., have added unimaginable amount of the same in thousands of women's lives. Partition of India also happens to be one of those occasions for patriarchy to release a series of humiliation and shame to several women from the both sides of border. This has been voiced by many writers and Rajinder Singh Bedi's Lajwanti has remained one of those significant texts to foreground the lot of a woman in this light. Through the moving tale of Sunder Lal and his wife Lajwanti, Bedi has brought into the light the image of Sita who in spite of being dutiful and loyal to her husband, was asked to leave the palace and reside in forest almost all alone. Sita had to undergo a kind of agnipariksha. This has been represented in an altogether different time and space with sheer psychological insights.

**Keywords:** Lajwanti, Sita, Patriarchy, Border, Suffering, Home, Homeless

Rajinder Singh Bedi is unanimously recognized and widely acclaimed as one of the most versatile voices among the 20th century Progressive writers along with Sultana Jafri, Ismat Chughtai, Vishwamitra Aakil, Ali Sardar Jafri, Krishan Chander Mahendranath, Mumtaz Hussain, Sahir Ludhianvi and Habib Tanvir. In the early 20th century, Urdu, the lingua franca of Bedi was the language of sophisticated literature but in the magical hands of him it underwent a metamorphosis in the same manner in which the history of the people in this era changed. Urdu became more malleable and democratic and yet stronger than before. Bedi's Urdu can be said to be a perfect amalgamation of rustic, filled with regional flavor and colloquial fragrances. Bedi's career in films as a scriptwriter and dialogue writer of several memorable classics of Hindi cinema like *Mirza Ghalib* (1954), *Devdas* (1955), *Madhumati* (1958), *Rangoli* (1962), *Anupama* (1966),

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Mere Hamdam Mere Dost (1968) Satyakam (1969), Dastak (1970), Abhimaan (1973), Nawab Sahib (1978) Ek Chadar Maili Si (1986) and many more often overshadow the writer of literature, who was termed as the “king of themes” by his contemporary writers. He has successfully established himself as a notable writer when his two short story collections Daan-O-Daam (The Catch), featuring his prominent story Garam Coat (Warm Coat) and Grehan (The Eclipse) got published in 1940 and 1942 respectively. Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten altogether that Bedi himself never undervalued his writing for films because in his times writers were barely paid royalty even for their popular books. This must precisely be the reason that even the most established writers like Manto and Sahir Ludhianvi wrote for films. In this connection, in an interview Bedi openly confesses that he came to films as a matter of despair simply because there was nothing else to do. It was a matter of earning a livelihood. He didn't come with the attitude that all these people were churning foolishness. In spite of this he maintained a fine balance between these two modes of artistic reproduction and was honoured with the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1965 for Ek Chadar Maili Si — a novella based on the practice of levirate marriage (in which the brother of a deceased man is obliged to marry the widow) in Punjab.

According to Milan Kundera the realm of fiction is essentially a meeting ground of opposites and contraries, a space large enough to accommodate competing versions of truth, unlike the real world where each of these versions must necessarily collide with the other, overpower and, preferably, annihilate it. He further opines that fiction does not, at least, should not moralise. Rather it imparts a kind of wisdom –trans-empirical wisdom(as quoted in Memon xii). Every individual being is bestowed with a visionary flash. This happens to be the reservoir of fresh and new experiences thus leading to new stature which need not to be validated through any external agency. Had it been otherwise, none of what is occurring today in South Asia would have occurred as we would have been the wiser for our perusal of the fictional works written in the immediate aftermath of Indo-Pak Partition. Again, if one were to write the history of the west mainly on the basis of the creative achievement of its writers, it would be difficult to imagine the same west capable of Holocaust, Bosnian Genocide, Armenian Genocide, “Stolen generations” of Aborigines, Native American Genocide, Pygmy Genocide and the most recently War in Darfur in Sudan. And as further Kundera puts it that fiction does not write the history of a society, instead it writes the history of the individual(as quoted in Memon xii).

The partition of India in 1947 and the associated bloody riots resulting into immense panorama of futility and anarchy inspired many creative writers in India and Pakistan to create literary and cinematic depictions of this event. The approach towards partition was mainly based on two major situations. While some creations depicted the massacres during the refugee

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migration, others concentrated on the aftermath of the partition in terms of difficulties faced by the refugees in both sides of the border. Literature describing the human cost of independence and partition comprises Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), several short stories such as *Toba Tek Singh* and *Sahae* by Saadat Hassan Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti*, Ashfaq Ahmad's *The Shepherd*, Jamila Hashimi's *Banished*, Upendernath Ashk's *Tableland*, Intizar Hussain's *An Unwritten Epic*, IsmatChughtai's *Roots*, Urdu poems such as *Subh-e-Azadi* (*Freedom's Dawn*, 1947) by Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Bhasham Sahni's *Tamas* (1974), Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1965), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* (1988) and Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1980), which won the Booker Prize and the Booker of Bookers, weaved its narrative based on the children born with magical abilities on midnight of August 14, 1947. *Freedom at Midnight* (1975) is a non-fiction work by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre that chronicled the events surrounding the first Independence Day celebrations in 1947.

There seems to be a paucity of films related to the independence and partition but some early films depicting the circumstances of the independence, partition and the aftermath include: Nemai Ghosh's *Chinnamul* (1950), Dharmputra (1961), Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), Komal Gandhar (1961), *GarmHava* (1973) and *Tamas* (1987). From the late 1990s onwards more films on these themes were made, including several mainstream films, such as *Earth* (1998), *Train to Pakistan* (1998) (based on the aforementioned book), *Hey Ram* (2000), *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001), *Pinjar* (2003), *Partition* (2007) and *Madrasapattinam* (2010). The biopic like *Gandhi* (1982), *Jinnah* (1998) and *Sardar* (1993) also feature independence and partition as significant events in their screenplay.

Lajwanti "touch-me-not," the flower that shuts its leaves upon human contact happens to be the title of Rajinder Singh Bedi's one of the most famous and popular stories. Here Bedi explores the tragic plight of abducted women during the violence and upheaval caused by the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. The holocaust of partition caused the death tolls ranging from 1.5 million to 2 million. The maximum amount of torture and infliction was mounted upon women as men of diverse groups took their revenge by abducting and raping them as long as they could and then leaving them to be the victim of their respective husbands, family members, and relatives. In January 1948, Pt. Nehru too made a strong public appeal:

I am told that there is unwillingness on the part of their relatives to accept those girls and women [who had been abducted] back in their homes. This is most objectionable and wrong attitude to take and any social custom that supports this attitude must be condemned. These girls

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and women require our tender and loving care and their relatives should be proud to take them back. (Ray 10)

The repeated appeals from national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Pt. Nehru merely indicate that the number of families refusing to give up their beliefs was significantly large. In this connection Urvashi Butalia observes that, “For the community, it was women’s sexual purity that became important. For the state ... their religious identity was paramount” (ibid). Hundreds of thousands of Hindu women were abducted by Muslim men and vice-versa. In order to exert their sense of individuality and identity and to retain their dignity, many women killed themselves. But most of them continued to live a life synonymous to life-in-death or death-in-life situation as they, including the perpetrators of violence and predators, remained silent and did not let the traumatic emotions and chilling experiences come out of their psyche.

Bedi’s Lajwanti picturesquely maps the aftermath of great holocaust when people had washed their bodies from their bodies, “they turned their attention to those who had not suffered bodily but had been wounded in their hearts” (Lajwanti 14). In every street and by-lane they set up a rehabilitating committee to inspire the families to readily accept the women returning from the other side of the border. Rehabilitation programmes related to acquiring business, lands and homes were carried out enthusiastically. But the most difficult task was to accept the lot of returned abducted women and to rehabilitate them in the hearts. It was strongly opposed by people living in the vicinity of the temple of Narain Bawa.

The campaign was initiated by the residents of Mulla Shakoora. A local Vakil Sahib was elected its president and Babu Sunder Lal was given the most important post of Secretary. It was the opinion of the old petition writer and many other respectable citizens of the locality that no one would work more zealously than Sunder Lal, because amongst the women abducted during the riots, and not recovered, was Sunder Lal's wife, Lajwanti. Under the banner of the Rehabilitation of Hearts Committee, Rasaloonad Neki Ram took recourse to early morning processions through the streets. Along with the song touch the leaves of the lajwanti, they curl and wither away, Sunder Lal used to let himself loose in the thoughts of his wife, “Who knows where she might be? In what condition? What would she be thinking of him? Would she ever come back- and his feet would falter on the cobblestone pavement” (15)?

Sunder Lal had extended his personal pain to altogether new height and transformed the same into public pain and anguish. In this regard Bedi writes:

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His pain was no longer his; it had become part of the world's anguish. And to spare himself its devastation he had thrown himself headlong into serving the people. All the same, every time he joined his companions in the song, he couldn't wonder at how delicate the human heart is. The slightest thing could hurt it. Exactly like the lajwanti plant, whose leaves curl up at the barest touch? (ibid)

But he had behaved very badly towards his Lajwanti. He had treated her as poorly as possible. He would not let a single flimsiest pretext to go in vain to beat her. He had allowed himself to be irritated with everything she did even with the way she stood up or sat down, the way she cooked and the way she served his food. Lajwanti was a slender and agile village girl. Life in the open air and sunshine had tanned her skin and filled her with an animal vitality. She ran about the lanes in her village with the mercurial grace of dew drops on a leaf. Her slim figure was full of robust health. When he first saw her, Sunder Lal was little dismayed. But when he noticed that Lajwanti, even in chastisement and adversity, displaying a strong sense of perseverance, he increased the dose of thrashing. He was unaware of the limit of human endurance. And Lajwanti's reactions were of little help; even after the most violent beating all Sunder Lal had to do was to smile and the girl would break into giggles, "If you beat me ever again, I'll never speak to you" (16). In a nutshell she was a law-abiding wife. A traditional wife for whom husband was everything. Pati Parmeshwara. Whatever be the case; husband's beating, love, cajoling, hitting and hurting, nothing matters. Only one smile from the husband and all the agonies are gone. Long live such husbands.

That's how husbands treat their wives – she knew this truth as well as any other village girl. If a woman showed the slightest independence, the girls themselves would be the first to disapprove. 'Ha, what kind of man is he? Can't even keep his little woman in line! (ibid)

Not only this, as if the physical punishment had become a yugdharma, these women composed songs of the beating men gave their wives. Lajwanti herself used to sing: Marry a city boy? – no sir, not me./Look at his boots. And my waist is narrow. The exclusive female body is reduced to a commodity, to play upon.

But after losing his wife in the wake of partition Sunder Lal modified his perspectives, quite possible out of the learning from past experiences and started taking recourse to a kind of interior monologue and would say:

If I could get another chance, just one more chance, I'd rehabilitate Laju in my heart. I'd show the people that these poor women are hardly to blame for their abduction, their victimization

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by lecherous rioters. A society which is unable to accept and rehabilitate these innocent women is rotten to the core, fit only to be destroyed. (16-17)

And further, he would request people to

. . . take these women under their roof and give them the same status which any woman, any mother, daughter, sister, or wife enjoyed. He would argue the families never to mention, even to hint at the things the poor women had to suffer, because their hearts were already wounded, already fragile, like the leaves of the touch me not plant, ready to curl up at the merest touch. (17)

One day the Rehabilitation of Hearts Committee was out early in the evening to preach. It trespassed into an area near the temple which was looked upon as the citadel of orthodox reaction. The faithful people were seated on a cement platform under the peepul tree and were listening to a commentary on the Ramayana. Narain Bawa was narrating the episode about Rama overhearing a washer man saying to his errant wife: "I'm no Raja Ramchander, who would take Sita back after she had spent so many years with Ravan" (20), being overcome by the implied rebuke, Ram Chandra had ordered his own wife Sita, who was at that time pregnant, to leave the palace. Further Bawa added that "Can we find a better example of Ram Raj. True Ram Raj in which a washer man's words to receive the utmost consideration" (ibid).

To this Sunder Lal responded and spoke up that they did not want a Ram Raj of this kind. Naturally it was taken as a defiant attitude and the crowd asked him to maintain silence and be quiet. But Sunder Lal didn't retreat and came forward and stated that nobody could stop him. When he was told that he didn't know much about the traditions of Shastras, to which quite ironically, Sunder Lal retorted that he understood at least one thing: in Ram Raj the voice of a washer man was heard but in the present-day people could not hear the voice of Sunder Lal. He began to speak that Sri Ram was our hero. But what kind of justice was this, that he accepted the words of a washer man and refused to take the words of so great a Maharani as his wife! When he was reminded that Sita was Ram's own wife, Sunder Lal broke out:

Yes, there are many things in this world that I don't understand. But as I look at it, under true Ram Raj, man won't be able to oppress even himself. Injustice against oneself is as great sin as injustice against another. Today Lord Ram has again thrown Sita out of his house, just because she was compelled to live with Ravan for some time. But was able to blame for it? Wasn't she a victim of deceit and treachery, like our numberless mothers and sisters today? Was it a question of Sita's truth or falsehood or of the stark beastliness of the demon Ravan, who has ten human heads,



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but also has another, bigger one, that of a donkey? Today our Sita has been expelled once again, totally without fault, our Sita ... Lajwanti.... (21)

Here it is interesting to see the revisionist interpretations on the ending of the Ramayana and the example of Sita. In this connection, in the Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan, Ramanujan argues that we should abandon the notion of an authoritative and original Ramayana. There are and many variants of the text and each performance of the Ramayana has unique textures and fresh contexts. Instead, he argues that there is no text that is original, and no telling is a mere retelling (131-160). In *When Does Sita Cease to Be Sita?* Velcheru Narayana Rao writes, "In choosing to return to the earth: Sita has accomplished two things: she has proven her chastity and demonstrated her independence, as well. It is both a declaration of her integrity and a powerful indictment against a culture that suspects women" (Rao 226). Sita's character, informed by postcolonial feminist understandings, is often understood as speaking to women's agency within patriarchy. Madhu Kishwar in her *Yes to Sita, No to Ram* interviews diverse Indian women and opines that:

...Indian women are not endorsing female slavery when they mention Sita as their ideal. Sita is not perceived as being a mindless creature who meekly suffers maltreatment at the hands of her husband without complaining. Nor does accepting Sita as an ideal mean endorsing a husband's right to behave unreasonably and a wife's duty to bear insult generously. She is seen as a person whose sense of dharma is superior and more awe-inspiring than that of Ram – someone who puts even *maryada purushottam* Ram – the most perfect of men – to shame. (290)

Kishwar in her interviews demonstrates the enduring legacy of the Sita figure among both Hindu and Muslim women's communities. Women regard Sita as a figure of strength in the face of harsh conditions and thus relate to her example. Kishwar also takes into account the responses of Indian men to Sita's legacy. Mahatma Gandhi's conception of Sita during independence, envisioned modern-day Sita figures as women who do not channel all their energies into domestic duties but who become leaders in rebuilding a just, self-governing and exploitation-free society. Madhu also writes of Sharad Joshi from Shektari Sangathana, who developed a creative use of the Sita symbol by inaugurating a Lakshmi Mukti campaign as Sita is believed to be the reincarnation of the goddess Lakshmi). In this campaign, he asserted that the peasantry could not prosper until young women or *gharlakshmis* (household goddesses of prosperity) had the curse of Sita Maya removed. The curse could be removed, he argued, by assigning property in women's names. By telling his story of Sita's destitution during pregnancy, Joshi intended to convince the peasantry that they could not obtain their due from society until they redressed the wrongs of their own

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Sitas. By transferring land to their wives and daughters, they would be paying off a long overdue debt (as quoted in *The Mythology*230) Thus, we see that subversive element including the version of Sunder Lal's defense of Sita, existing the Ramayana tradition, challenging traditional values in the colonial/ postcolonial India.

Sunder Lal's psychological state of being was shaken because of his sense of emasculation and his view of 'abducted' women as passive victims of the other. Undoubtedly his repentance was genuine but what kind of 'acceptance' was he going to provide his Laju with? Was he capable of rehabilitating her in the same space of domestic sphere before her abduction? His dilemma became evident when he heard the news of Lajwanti's recovery. Sunder Lal shivered with a strange fear and felt warmed by the holy fire of his love. Here the representations are two-fold. On the one hand Lajwanti is represented as being aware of her patriarchal patronage in order to survive in the community when she expresses her fear about how Sunder Lal will react to her sexual 'contamination'. On the other hand, Sunder Lal's reception of Lajwanti is torn between his negative reaction to her 'healthiness' and 'well-being' (suggesting that she may not have been as much of a 'victim' of the other man as he would like to think) and the 'new' pressures on his behavior as a (male) citizen in the modern nation state to welcome her back as his wife though Lajwanti is described as inebriated with an unknown joy. When she first returned to her home Sunder Lal neither rejected nor beaten her. She came to understand that his acceptance of her was in exchange for her silence and performance according to the demands of patriarchy. Sunder Lal began to address Lajwanti as 'devi' or goddess, placing her identity, agency and everyday experiences under constant erasure. While he placed the 'blame' for the stigma attached to Lajwanti's honour on social conventions, he also invalidated her potential to resist those conventions.

Therefore, the narrative suggests that the ambivalent terms of Lajwanti's reintegration into the community and the requirement of nation state to surrender her identity as a woman who can question her husband or renegotiate the terms of her patriarchal patronage. Once again, another Sita has been asked to go for trial or agnipariksha. But this trial is more difficult and arduous as it involves no obvious resistance or protest or order from the husband. Had her husband asked her in angry tone including beating it would have been easier for her to bear the pang, but in this case, silence emerges as the most lethal weapon against which there is no medicine. Once again, she is reduced to a fragile object like glass or lajwanti flower which would splinter and curl at the slightest touch. Laju gazes at herself in the mirror and in the end, she can no longer recognise the Laju she has known. She has been rehabilitated but not accepted. Sunder Lal does not want eyes to see her tears nor ears to hear her wailing. Unlike Amrita Pritam's Pooro in Pinjer who defies



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patriarchal and territorial boundaries, effectively using her agency to critique the reality of partition by choosing to stay in Pakistan, and succeeding in escaping from the clutches of Rashida, her abductor, only to fall into the abyss of rejection from her parents, Lajwanti depicts a world where women have totally internalized the idea that they are little more than commodities. Imagine the horror of being abducted, taken to another country and being raped over and over for days, months and even years. When such a victim returns to her home country, she is asked that her failure to kill herself has brought greater amount of shame on the family. One is also driven out from the very home which once promised security, safety and care. If not driven out from home, at least one is silently ignored and rejected and politically transformed to the status of something more than nothingness.

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