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**“Lajwanti” and “Banished” as Survivor narratives that take us to the  
Enduring Trauma of the Female Survivors of the Partition.**

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**Abstract**

Partition narratives have been in focus ever since the horrific and cruel nature of the Indian partition started getting representation in literary narratives. Crimes against women soon took the central stage in these representations. This research offers to investigate the trauma of the female survivor in Rajinder Singh Bedi's Lajwanti and Jamila Hashmi's Banished and analyze how the trauma of the women during partition unfolded in layers of complexities. The paper also attempts a comparative analysis of the representation in these texts. The method used for the research is textual analysis in context with a psychosocial approach.

**Keywords:** Partition, fiction, trauma, gender, survivor narrative

**Introduction**

*“Ye daagh daagh ujala ye shab-gazida sahar  
vo intizar tha jis ka ye vo sahar to nahin...”* (Fiaz)

The “Euphoria of Independence subsumed the pangs of Partition and relegated the narratives of disruption, dislocation and ruthless violence to the deep chasms of forgetfulness.” (Banik). The trauma of the incidents has been nailed into the minds of people who lived through it and also of the generations thereafter. However, the partition fiction brought forth to the surface the gendered idea of violence and trauma. The political program of creating the two nations of India and Pakistan was inscribed upon the bodies of women, especially the ones who, were abducted, raped, forced to convert, forced into marriage, forced back into what the two states defined as "their proper homes," torn apart from their families once during the partition by those who abducted them, and again, after the partition by the State which tried to 'recover' and 'rehabilitate' them" (Butalia).

Thus, in the process of redefining their identity, it was the afterlife of the event that proved to be even more shattering than the actual division. The aim of this paper is to reflect upon the trauma of female survivors of partition through the fictional narrative "Banished" by Jamila Hashmi and "Lajwanti" by Rajinder Singh Bedi. These short stories, written about the time of partition, display the horror, uncertainty, and loss of self as in identity and as human altogether of the women who have survived the violence but have been engulfed by the chaos it created. Saman Ashfaq, in his paper 'Homing in on "the Un-homed": A Reading of Rajinder Singh Bedi's

“Lajwanti” and Jamila Hashmi’s “Banished” have argued about these two short stories of partition that -

“While “Lajwanti” privileges the subjectivity of the "recovered" woman, "Banished" explores the consciousness of the "abducted" woman. Both stories complement each other and give a voice to the anguish of the abducted woman in different ways. The two stories begin in media res and, instead of concentrating on the physical aspect of violence, explore the emotional ramifications of the trauma of abduction and recovery, which is largely ignored or silenced in nationalist historiographies.” (Ashfaq).

The metaphor of women as a mother has long been the identity of a country like India, "...the nation is often venerated as a female, especially as a mother drawing upon images of purity, honor, and nurture, while, at the same time, their bodies render them vulnerable to the "outsider" or the "other," and hence the recovery of these women was vital to the sustenance of what is largely termed as "national honor." However, the process of 'recover' and 'restore' inflicted on them the trauma of scepticism as it gave way to larger question that if they were wholeheartedly accepted? They were either rejected, branded as 'dishonored' and 'defiled' women, or they faced some serious social ostracism and had to survive their trauma on an everyday basis.

In the narrative of "Banishment," Bibi, whose parents were killed in the partition and she was "dishonorably dragged" from her home to be a maid and bear children from the same abductor, craves earnestly to return to her family where she keeps oscillating between her past and the present. However, she refuses to and hides away when the soldiers come to recover her, for it was not her brothers who came to take her but the soldiers she didn't know. She knew nothing of the place and person she would be taken to. "Repatriate them to what country? Where? To whom? .... [and] who were these soldiers? And what country would that be like?" (Hashimi 100). Her denial of returning back can be analyzed as an untended effort to cling to the scrap of whatever constitutes her home now. Also, not ignore the fact that there was prevalent human trade marketing shamelessly displaying young abducted women, thus leaving with a person complete stranger would not only remind them of her own abduction but there was an unintended fear of becoming a part of human trafficking.

A similar sense of dilemma and doubt was prevalent in Lajwanti from the narrative “Lajwanti” too. Even though she had recovered, she shivered at the thought of rejection. Standing with her head down, she knew "how badly he had treated her before, and now that she was returning after living with another man, there was no telling what he might do." (Hashimi 25). As we do see in the narrative of “Lajwanti,” the perspective of the traditionalists or conservatives who preach the atrocities of honor and shame, as the text outlines: "They should have killed themselves. They should have taken poison to save their virtue." (Bedi). Dr. Somdev Banik writes, "If

the violated women had committed suicides to protect their honor, these women would have been glorified and called martyrs. There was no glory considered in their survival and suffering, and the past be better buried in mortifying silence.". The character of Sunder Lal, husband of Lajwanti, believed these women to be blameless and wanted people to accept these women with the same status, even though he was regretful of the treatment he gave to Lajwanti before partition and determined to rehabilitate in his heart once she is recovered, he is utmost disappointed to see Lajwanti "fairer and healthier than before." And even after he accepts her, unlike other women who are not lucky enough even to be recognized by their family members, he denies her the old identity of self. The concept of acceptance is so multifarious in the context as to argue that this acceptance that these "saved" women are subjected to is solely based on the condition and perception of male dominance. The right to be "rescued" and "accepted" depends on the political, social, and individual idea of the masculine agenda of overpowering the other. Here, Sunder Lal "accepts" Lajwanti on terms that she no longer be Lajo, her wife, but the "devi" that he could boast about, taken into his shade, the mercy he showed upon, the Greatness of his heart and his unquestionable love for her.

The most effective repercussion of partition for the abducted women was the loss of identity and home. In the narrative "Banished," the narrator is anonymous; she is not given a name except that her brother used to call her Bibi. "Trapped in a newly born but degenerated nation, the unidentified narrator fluctuates between optimism and hopelessness." (Sumita). Similarly, Bedi chooses to give her heroine the name "Lajwanti," who is fragile but yet doesn't die easily. Lajo redeems both characteristics. She is displayed as an innocent, fragile, and passive victim of violence and needs to be taken into the shed of male power. The curling up of touch-me-not here represents the shame and embarrassment. The unnamed character of Bibi and the deliberate name given to Lajwanti suggests the argument of D. Jill Savitt, where she writes, "Women are kept innocent and ignorant, are protected from all that may threaten the sanctity and purity of what the world (male) wants a woman to be. Anything that punctures the woman's stereotype also invades the male's sacred territory. If a woman is not what she is supposed to be—what then must a man do to keep up with her?" (Savitt)

This sophisticated, constructed, and circumscribed name given to the female characters, in spite of being the protagonist of the story, gives prominence to their constructed personalities and repudiated identity and brings the intention of the author behind the concept in question. Was it a deliberate attempt on the side of the author to bridge the identity Crisis in life and literature to argue in context with the denied Equality of existence and identity of women, or was it an unconscious male perception considered normal, where the actions, principles, decisions, and rules are the domain of men of the society, and women just an idol to be worshipped until she is pure and identical to the perception of men. Dr. Sumita writes, "When a woman abandons her hope and desire, she is considered a goddess...Elevating a woman to

the status of a goddess or mythological figure is a way of negating her emotions, aspirations, views, disregarding her sufferings.". By imposing her identity on Laxmi, Badi Ma tries to erase her past and reconstruct her identity, where she becomes an ideal Hindu wife who needs to be faithful, compliant, and dutiful even to the man who seized her identity and chastity. In "Lajwanti," Sunder Lal also brands her as "Devi" and can no longer see her as his own Lajo. "His inability to accept Lajwanti as his very own Lajo and her subsequent anointment as "devi" closely aligns with the trope of nation-as-woman, where the woman's body becomes the body of the motherland violated by a marauding foreigner." (Ashfaq). This dissolution and pathological division of her identity ruptures her sense of belonging and home, where "she could be many things, but could never hope to be old Laju again." To Lajwanti, the term "devi" symbolizes the breakdown of her conjugal life and is a reminder of her violated past that explicitly highlights her State of impure womanhood. Her rehabilitation in her husband's heart, in turn, made her homeless in her own home.

The aspect of muted gender in its multifariousness is another concept well talked about in both stories. Sunder Lal wants Lajo to forget her traumatic past, but he himself doesn't give her space to do that. His changed behaviors become an inevitable zone of traumatic memories for her, and she surrenders to perpetual silence. Gural, too, wants Bibi to forget her past as a Partition victim and accept the identity of a wife and mother. As Ashfaq highlights, "Bibi's decision to continue living with Gural does not suggest a concrete resolution of her life. It does not suggest an erasure of her past life and home. Moreover, just as Lajwanti's inclusion in her own home demands her silence, Bibi's is also contingent upon her forgetting the past." (Ashfaq) This decision of denial enforces the desperate need for control over their lives, which psychologically does offer them short-term relief, but in the process, the damage they endure is permanent. The demanded and forced denial and the forgetfulness of the past confabulate the status of women and question their own perceptions countered by the masculine dominance not only over the physical existence of the women they hold but also their psychological self, limiting their existence as a mere object of control.

Both the stories, under the scrutiny of partition violence, highlight the trauma and pain that female survivors had to witness and undergo, endeavored them by the family, society, and State. Living either namelessly or by the identity given to them by society to live with the trauma of the incident throughout their life. They are denied bodily agency and the status of an equal human, depriving them of their own self-consciousness, waiting for acceptance by the person they called their home and have been married to, or by the person who left her no choice of home anywhere and has them wounded, discarded, and non-existent homeless body to satisfy their urges, needs, and temptation. The stories have brought to the surface the very concept of home and the self, which has been forever distorted and is no longer associated with the physicality of the sense.

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