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Gendered Experiences of Recovery: Exploring Gulzar Singh Sandhu's "Antla Teela" in the Post-Partition Context

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Abstract:

The present paper explores how women are victimized and how patriarchal, masculine hegemonic discourse about nationalism is performable, with women ultimately serving as silent, submissive objects of male authority. The term motherland serves a symbolic meaning for evoking a dominant, phallic story. The intertwining of the necessary fate of individuals situated within the historical textuality of the nation is highlighted in Gulzar Singh Sandhu's story "Antla Teela." The analysis attempts to read the subtle power structures in the story. The story's peculiar aspect is how a legal framework—designed to settle ownership claims in human relations—smoothly resolves a question that could otherwise become unsolvable or deadlocked.

Keywords: Hegemony, Gender, Motherland, Nation, Power Structures.

Differences in physical characteristics were probably the source of the original gender roles. Eventually, increased self-awareness brought about complex interactions with society and oneself, which might have contributed to the emergence of political consciousness. Thus, affluent men might have influenced societal structures to suit their viewpoints, contextualising Nietzsche's *will to power*. This dynamic has perhaps shaped power relations and society's development. Male dominance has influenced Western and Indian metaphysics and epistemology over time, elevating presence and the phallus. Delving deeper, Derrida's study of logocentrism, or the metaphysics of presence, represents the apex of this upward trajectory. Derrida's insights have motivated French feminist scholars like Helene Cixous and Catherine

Clement to rigorously dissect all-encompassing narratives, leading to a significant reassessment of deeply ingrained ideologies. Our prevailing cognitive structure evidently prioritises presence over absence, thereby sustaining a phallogocentric worldview that gives greater weight to the perspectives of men. As feminist scholars Sangari and Vaid note, "...each aspect of reality is gendered" (Didur 24), shedding light on the pervasive gender bias in our understanding of the world.

Before proceeding, it is crucial to situate the concept of nationhood and identify the gendered dynamics that shape its formation. Gender and nationhood, perceived as social and human constructs, are interrelated concepts. Even though each person is born with unique physical characteristics, social interactions and environmental factors shape how people develop gendered identities. As new complexities, such as the difficulties faced by transsexual people, emerge, this evolutionary process encourages continued investigation in the domain of identity discourse. The widespread binary classification of people into male and female groups feeds prejudices ingrained in the power struggles that are fundamental to human nature. In this context, the present analysis decodes the center-margin dichotomy by problematizing the natural, imposed, and inevitable for understanding the subaltern.

Taking a more comprehensive view, Foucault has developed a comprehensive theory of the relationship between knowledge, the body, and power. He thinks that formal and informal socio-political institutions shape not just human minds but also human bodies. In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, he highlights that "...where there is desire, power relations are already present (82). To define and subdue sexuality, power employs methods and forms of knowledge. He uses the term *biopower* to refer to a variety of methods and strategies used to control and subjugate the bodies within a society. This is how he exposes the contingent and power-seeking genealogies that underlie the covert social structures and gendered roles. This perspective reveals that society articulates and performs the conceptual structures of nationalism, nationhood, and national consciousness, all of which have their roots in gender.

The devious crafting of the woman's story, which establishes her sexual purity as a symbol and vehicle for a country's pride and innocence, is equally perplexing. The community or nation invests women with ideological significance as their most valuable possessions, using them as the primary means to transmit the nation's values from one generation to the next. In his book *Nationalism and Sexuality*, Mosse contends that masculinity has been the predominant approach by which the idea of nationhood is conceived and enacted. Because women are viewed as "...the biological and cultural reproducers of the nation as pure and modest, and men

defend the national image and protect the nation's territory, and for women's purity, modesty, and the moral code, the nation is thus always portrayed as an effeminate entity that requires constant protection" (Yuval Davis, *Gender and Nation* 34).

Men's collective consciousness also reflects the historical arrangement of women as property. Men emphasize that during the violence of the partition, they abducted women and used them as property to secure a male victory over another. People develop and ingrain similar ideas about the motherland, stating that it is a patriotic nationalist's duty to defend one's homeland, and in the process, it becomes normal for them to subjugate or plunder the homelands of others. Due to ill-informed political decisions and divisive ideologies, the horrific violence that accompanied India's and Pakistan's partition resulted in the kidnapping, rape, and torture of women from both regions. Butalia notes that "...true stories are hidden within the women's bosoms and buried in their lips, and the violence against women is covered in silence" (45).

Let's now examine a narrative that demonstrates the victimisation of women and the performability of patriarchal, masculine hegemonic discourse about nationalism, where women ultimately function as the silent, submissive objects of male authority. Notably, the term "motherland" serves a symbolic meaning, evoking a dominant, phallic story. Gulzar Singh Sandhu's story "Antla Teela" highlights the intertwining of individuals' necessary fates within the historical textuality of the nation. The present analysis is an attempt to read through the subtle power structures in the story. The story's peculiar aspect is how a legal framework—designed to settle ownership claims in human relations—so smoothly resolves a question that could otherwise become unsolvable or deadlocked. This resolution, however, prevents the community from participating and examining the matter under their jurisprudence. According to Das, "...the forms of governmentality that were set in motion after the riots completely entangled the lives of the community" (167).

The narrative of "Antla Teela" delves into the harrowing aftermath of the partition, shedding light on the agonising recovery efforts orchestrated under the banner of nationalistic fervour to reclaim the lost daughters of the motherland. Fatimah, a young Muslim woman, endures the unspeakable horrors of torture, rape, and degradation at the hands of Hindu assailants amidst the chaos of riots. Amidst this darkness, Chandan emerges as a beacon of hope, a Hindu man whose profound love for Fatimah transcends the religious divide. Despite being a simple-hearted, hard-working farmer, Chandan finds solace in his toil, a refuge from the torment of the world around him. During the bureaucratic maneuver known as 'chakbandi,'

Chandan fell victim to his rivals' machinations, colluding with corrupt revenue officials. Left with only a sliver of wasteland to eke out a living, he found himself at the mercy of circumstances. In this moment, he rescues Fatimah from the clutches of a violent mob, braving the ire of his entire village by sheltering her in his home. Despite his unwavering affection for Fatimah, Chandan faces formidable opposition, notably from his own mother, who adamantly opposes their union. Not only this, but her treacherous act of informing the authorities about Fatimah's presence underscores the societal pressures Chandan contends with.

However, his love for Fatimah remains steadfast, unyielding to the manipulative schemes aimed at separating them. In moments of frustration, Chandan's temper flares, often directed at his mother's misguided intentions of selling Fatimah for profit and orchestrating a marriage within their own community. Interestingly, such anguish is the outcome of his dire economic circumstances. Despite these trials, the thought of abandoning Fatimah never crosses Chandan's mind, a testament to the enduring strength of his love amidst adversity. Fatimah, gently invoking his mother's aversion to her, delicately probes, "You know, Chandan, I am not a pure woman. Your mother says she will bring a pure and beautiful daughter-in-law for you" (Sandhu, "Antla Teela" 192), to which Chandan's response drips with disdain: "Is my mother going to keep you, or I? Don't listen to anybody. Whatever you are, you are. Don't bother me much" (192). Now, her tears, a poignant reflection of her shattered hope, elicit a painful confession: "I know what I am, but how am I to be blamed for this?" (192).

In Fatimah's tears, Chandan finds himself transported to the haunting memory of the day he valiantly rescued her from the clutches of brutality. The image of her torn garments, her pallid countenance, and her lifeless gaze sear into his consciousness, reigniting the flames of fury within him and propelling him perilously close to the precipice of madness. On that fateful day, Fatimah, wounded by Chandan's impassioned outburst, resolves to depart from his side. As Chandan rushes home from the fields, a scene of turmoil greets him, with his sister Banto's alarm alerting him to the presence of police and villagers at their doorstep. Despite Fatimah's seeming readiness to leave, her heart yearns for Chandan's plea to detain her. Still reeling from their earlier altercation, Chandan implores her to remain, beseeching assistance from all who would listen. In the midst of this emotional whirlwind, Chandan's mother interjects with words that cut through him like a blade, leaving him mentally adrift in a sea of anguish and despair. As the authorities forcibly escort Fatimah away, a lingering question hangs heavy in her throat: what fate befell Chandan? The abyss of despair seems to have swallowed his hopes and resolve.

The story subtly reveals the tragic consequences of the recovery efforts undertaken by both nations. It challenges the sensibilities of any rational individual to comprehend how this fictionalised narrative of nationhood could weave a tapestry of unity, only to swiftly vilify anything beyond its borders, to such an extent that even the most humane virtues seem to evaporate from the hearts and minds of ostensibly 'god-fearing' citizens. Under the guise of a seemingly benevolent mission to reclaim the daughters of the motherland lurk the insidious motives of phallogocentric notions of nationhood and nationalism. Gopaldaswamy Ayyenger's bill, which sanctioned and empowered the Indian government to conduct recovery operations, was the subject of fervent debates in the constituent assembly as it approached its expiration on December 30, 1949. These deliberations prominently underscored a majoritarian agenda, vilifying Pakistan for its perceived malevolent and apathetic stance in the joint endeavour of repatriating and reclaiming women, juxtaposed against India's purportedly humane and civilised approach. Amidst the clamour of delineating the roadmap of righteous nationhood and citizenship, the destinies and autonomy of individuals like Fatimah became obscured in the silence of a void devoid of substance. The hushed corridors of minds, ensnared by unquestioned dogmas of gendered and dubious political ideals, treated them as docile, submissive creatures, subject to arbitrary dictates. As articulated by Hriday Nath Kunzru, "...the restoration of women to their rightful home (i.e., Pakistan) was a great moral duty. We cannot refuse to fulfil our obligations because others decline to fulfil theirs....it was not an act of merit but degradation to keep unwilling persons within its territory and to compel them to give up their own religion and to embrace Islam" (qtd. in Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence* 178).

Notably, the women who chose not to return became ominous figures in the eyes of the state, with their voices drowned out by the cacophony of purported humanitarian endeavors. This is how rational voices like Chandan's find themselves isolated, scattered among the few who could rise above the collective frenzy of mindless violence, all in the name of God and nation. The state, whose very purpose is to safeguard the lives and dignity of its citizens, is also absent during this mindless frenzy under the labels of patriotism and nationalism. A woman like Fatima endures the harrowing ordeal of physical and psychological torture at the hands of fellow citizens, unleashing a dark and sinister energy masked by narratives of chivalry, patriotism, and chauvinism. Subsequently, she finds herself persecuted for being deemed impure and tainted, all because of the ambitions of another woman who harbours the desire to sell her own daughter for a good price to procure a 'pure' daughter-in-law. Amidst this turmoil,

there are a few advocates who express genuine concern for the women who are unwilling to return. Poornima Devi argues that:

...considerable time had passed since many women had been taken away. During this time, they have lived in association with one another and developed a mutual attachment...such girls should not be made to go back to countries to which they originally belonged merely because they happen to be Muslims or Hindus and merely because the circumstances and conditions under which they have been removed from their original homes could be described as abduction. (Qtd. in Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 180)

Mahavir Tyagi also opines that "...these girls had already been the victims of violence; would it not be another act of violence if they were again uprooted and taken away to the proposed camps against their wishes" (qtd. in Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence* 181). It is an insightful judgement on his part, recognising the profound trauma experienced by women like Fatimah, who had been forcibly rooted in unfamiliar soil yet managed to find the nutrients necessary for their growth and resilience.

The bill bestowed absolute discretionary powers upon the police, leaving women with no legal avenue to address their grievances. The communal politics and rhetoric deeply ingrained the community's inertia, condoning the forcible takeover of women like Fatimah through the lens of religio-gendered binaries. Those who remained silent witnesses to their suffering were either too intimidated and silenced to comprehend or respond, or they passively subscribed to perspectives such as that of the bill's architect, Gopaldaswamy Ayyengar, who adamantly refused to grant women agency in making decisions for themselves. He summarily dismissed such pleas, stating:

Women or abducted persons are rescued from surroundings which prime facie do not give them the liberty to make a free choice as regards their own lives. The object of this legislation is to put them in an environment that will make them feel free to make this choice...there has been hardly any case where, after these women were put in touch with their original fathers, mothers, brothers, or husbands, any one of them said that she wanted to go back to her abductor—a very natural state of feeling in the mind of a person who was, by exercise of coercion, abducted in the first place and put into the wrong environment. The idea is that in the environment that she is in at that moment, she is not a free

agent, she has not got the liberty of mind to say whether she wants to leave that environment and go back to her original environment or whether she should stay here. (Qtd. in Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 185)

These propositions also reveal the underlying prejudice of viewing women as capricious and irrational, incapable of deciding for themselves. The continent's collective consciousness consistently marginalizes her as a mere recipient of commands, perceiving her as a weak entity whose duty and salvation rest solely in submission to patriarchal authority.

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