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Afflicted by Partition and Deceived by Men: A Study of Female Characters in Selected Novellas of Qurratulain Hyder

Tania Baloria

Abstract:

Men and Women both suffered enormously because of the Partition that India faced. It was traumatic for both of them, but women were deceived by an extra inch. Women were not only troubled by displacing themselves geographically but also emotionally as they were betrayed by the men in their lives as depicted by Hyder in her writings. Qurratulain Hyder, witnessed the trauma of partition riots herself, when her house in Dehradun was burnt down and after that she migrated to Pakistan. She has written many novels, novellas and short stories. Hyder's protagonists are mostly women that unveil the Patriarchal notions of society. This paper studies the female characters of Qurratulain Hyder's two novellas *Sita Betrayed* translated by C.M Naim and *Housing Society*.

Keywords: Woman, Patriarchy, Qurratulain Hyder, Partition, Betrayal.

Partition in India divided people geographically. Men and Women both suffered enormously because of it. Partition was traumatic for both of them, but women were deceived by an extra inch. Women were not only troubled by displacing themselves geographically but also emotionally as they were betrayed by the men in their lives as depicted by Hyder in her writings. She mediates on the psychological trauma faced by women during partition and post partition. Hyder dwells her stories on the age old notion of patriarchy. Qurratulain Hyder has portrayed many different aspects of women in her stories through her challenging characters. Some women are mistreated, abducted, raped, and those uprooted from their homeland. These women characters feel displaced and display a quest for the self as they suffer oppression which is



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inflicted on them by the patriarchal society. Richard Lee in his article “For What is Identity Without a Stake in One’s Country?” suggests that “Women were arguably the worst victims of Partition having to endure not only the destruction of their homes, displacement and violence, but also abduction, prostitution, mutilation and rape” by men.

This paper presents a study of female character in two novellas of Qurratulain Hyder: *Sita Betrayed (Sitaharan)* (1960) and *The Housing Society* (1963).

These two selected novellas represent the major issues covered by Hyder in her works. Women characters in these two novellas are continuously in search of security, stability, and love, and try to find solace in the arms of their lovers. These women are uprooted because of the partition and are searching looking for their land throughout the stories. Hyder portrays the lead female characters that are deceived by men in love, marriage, or life. The writer tries to explain that male-dominated society has been exploiting women for long. The love and loyalty of a woman have been cunningly used by men for their own interests. *Sitaharan* is taken from Hyder’s collection of two novellas and a short story, *A Season of Betrayal* and translated into *Sita Betrayed* by C.M. Naim in 1999. The paper studies the translated novella of Qurratulain Hyder’s work.

Hyder’s *Sita* is originally from Sindh, Pakistan and the story is set in India, post-partition. She lost her family home and becomes a victim of alienation and isolation, because of the partition and also because of patriarchy. As Gayatri Spivak says, “the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (82-83). Spivak represent the voices of women and finds that displaced women are doubly jeopardized.

Sita Mirchandani had to leave her homeland, Sindh, after the partition because of which a void is created in her life’s trajectory. She feels hollowness after being uprooted and also because of a dearth of love and care she desires from the men in her life. Sindh plays an important role in her life and *Sita* constantly desires a connection with the homeland. The separation from her



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roots leaves her miserable. She once asks her friend, Irfan, “Don’t you see that this is my land? My fields, my villages, my saint’s tombs?” (58) Her life is under constant turbulence and she is always searching for some peace. Hyder explains that the trauma of partition created a condition where the people, caught in it, ended up as victims of identity crisis and identity politics. The same trauma is manifested in Sita Mirchandani. She in her eternal quest and to fill the void created by the partition, she repeatedly places her love and trust in the hands of men who constantly betray her. Sita longs for stability and is emotionally dependable on the men in her life and tries to find solace in the arms of those men who betray her.

Sita Mirchandani’s migration to Delhi after the Partition of India in 1947 was not an easy one. She, along with Bilquis and her elder sister, Farkhunda Baji, had to endure many refugee camps and rehabilitation centers. Sita belonged to an elite family before partition. Her family owned a bungalow and she had all the luxuries of life. But after partition, her family has to shift from one refugee camp to another before finally settling down. Ania Spyra in “Is Cosmopolitanism Not for Women? Migration in Qurratulain Hyder’s *Sita Betrayed* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*” comments on the pain and agony that partition offers:

The feeling of constant homelessness seems to come in some measure from the inability to trust the geographical confines of a nation-state. The Pre-Partition borders that gave Sita safety and a comfortable feeling of national belonging are suddenly arbitrarily redrawn, which makes her lose the patriarchal protection promised by the fixity of national boundaries. (9)

The loss of the family’s ancestral home led to an identity crisis in Sita after her displacement. She felt that she was in exile without a homeland. She neither belonged to India nor Pakistan. However, she was lucky enough to be adopted by her uncle and aunt who lived in Canada and had no children. She moves to Canada and enters Columbia University. There she meets Jamil and falls in love with him. In her passion, she decides to marry Jamil without the permission of her family. Marriage, which is known as a haven for many traditional women and



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provides security and stability, proves to be a failure for Sita. As it was an independent decision made by her to marry Jamil she tried her best to accommodate in the new phase of her life. She tries to change herself and be as Jamil wants her to be, but in vain. After a few years of marriage, Jamil lost interest in Sita and this detachment set her on a digressive path. Women are always undermined, to which Beauvoir opines “because she owns nothing, woman does not enjoy the dignity of being a person; she herself forms a part of the patrimony of man: first of her father, then of her husband” (114). Women throughout her life depends on the male figures, first her father, then husband and then maybe her son.

Jamil’s detachment shattered all of Sita’s trust and desires. Due to this detachment, she was assailed by the demons of alienation and rootlessness. She felt alienated equally in mind as in the physical sense which led her to choices that are typically considered immoral for women. To fulfill her desires, she felt attracted to Abul Fasahat Qamarul Islam Chowdhary who had come to America from Calcutta to study acting. Sita neglected societal norms and developed a relationship with Islam Chowdhary. However, unbeknown to her was the fact that even Islam Chowdhary was a product of patriarchy and would not see her struggle for belongingness as a genuine existential need. Thus, when Jamil threw her out of the house, she went to Islam to seek shelter. But he instead of providing her shelter asked her to leave him. Islam Chowdhary says:

I have committed a mistake, I will never accommodate with you. I am a very irresponsible man. Go back and ask Jamil to forgive you. He is a very nobleman. He must forgive you. I will also beg my pardon for him. We both had flown with the stream of emotion. Sita Rani, you can obtain a real comfort of life only in the house of a solid man. (154)

She was again shattered after this rejection and her love was met by betrayal.

After having suffered in two relationships, Sita returned to Delhi. The rejection and the betrayal made her completely disillusioned. She felt miserable and heart-broken. And then she



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comes across Irfan, her friend. After meeting in Delhi, Sita and Irfan traveled to Pakistan. They visited the places in Lahore and Sindh that she had missed all this while. She informed him of the history of these places which Irfan is unaware of. "I must go to Sadh Bela," Sita said for the second time. "We used to go to the annual fair there, and always had so much fun." (70) Sadh Bela is a meaningful place for Sita. The city was her homeland. She had shared and experienced intimate moments in Lahore and Sindh.

Relationships and marriage never brought a sense of security for Sita instead, it limited her freedom, as her husband Jamil remarried without divorcing her. On the contrary, she flouted the societal norms expected of married women, and each time she did so she was branded an infidel. Sita's journey continued and she met Leslie March but didn't find solace in him either.

Hyder represents the female psyche that is caught up in the complexity of culture and society. The protagonists struggle against the stereotypes that push women towards the margins. Meanwhile, she gets the news of her father's death and returns to her mother in Delhi. Here, she is once again confronted with solitude and loneliness:

All of a sudden, she came to realize that she has no friends. In this vast world, in this great scintillating capital and this milling crowd of acquaintances, she has no companion. Why not? What wrong she did with them? Amidst all this chaos, she remembered a famous painter, Projesh Kumar Chaudhry. (130)

She had been with Jamil, Qamar, Projesh but not in a single one of them, could she find any satisfaction of her soul. Sita again and again, throughout the story places her trust in the hands of men.

Though Sita Mirchandani was a modern, educated, and independent woman, but was dependent on men throughout her life. Soon she realizes that she has been deceived even by, Irfan who had left like "A gust of wind banged and the door shut" (173). The line here is a symbolic image of a trapped woman when the door has been shut and there is no way to escape.



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Sita suddenly becomes an allegorical figure, towards the end of the story. There is no escape for her. She found solace in neither of the two countries, Pakistan or India and not even by the men who accompanied her in different spheres of life. She commented, “All my life I’ve been preyed upon” (210) which was true to her situation till the end. *Sita Betrayed* portrays the deep-rooted psychological trauma, Sita had to go through.

The second novella by Qurratulain Hyder *The Housing Society* is taken from a collection of the book *A Season of Betrayal*. It is edited and translated by C.M. Naim. The story is about three heroines, Manzur-un-Nisa, Surayya and Salma. This novella is structured in two phases: pre-independent India and the post-independent Pakistan. The first phase of the story presents poverty with righteousness; exploitation and simplicity; strong kinship and contentment in a rural setting. The second phase is stigmatized with turmoil, selfishness, dissatisfaction, and the elusive aspirations of love and idealism.

In the pre-partition scenario, the lives of the three main characters are shown differently. Manzur-un-Nisa belonged to the family of marginal farmers in a village in Uttar Pradesh. The other character is Surayya Sultan, also known by the name; Basanti Begum belonged to a nearby village Muhammad Ganj and shared the same background as Manzur-un-Nisa’s. The third character around whom the story revolves is a girl, known as Chhoti Bitiya, though her real name is Salma Mirza. She is the daughter of a collector and younger sister of Salman.

When Surayya was thirteen and a half years old, the landlord of Sahroli and Durgakund’s Nawab Bhure, a 65-year old with several wives, sent a proposal of marriage for her but was rejected. The rejection is not well digested by Nawab Bhure and Surayya is abducted by the armed men. This changed her life completely. When she was released her mother started working in Collector Sahib’s home. He gave Surayya protection and helped her in her studies.

Another character Chhoti Bitiya had the advantage of living the life of a princess. Her lavish childhood is explained in the following lines, “She wore a hairy coat that looked like a



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bear-skin and a white-mustached old man in uniform was shading her with a colorful Parasad. It was just like in the fairytales” (180).

Within a few years, World War II occurs, followed by India’s independence and Partition, all in quick succession. Chhoti Bitiya’s house in Mussorie is burnt down by rioters. The collector, his wife, and daughter go away to Pakistan to live a life of new challenges and struggles as well as opportunities. So do Surayya (Basanti) and Jamshed, husband of Manzur-un-Nisa. But Manzur-un-Nisa decides to stay back with her parents in India. Chhoti Bitiya’s elder brother, Salman, instead of trying to join the Civil Service to honor his parents’ wishes, becomes a communist. In ‘Trauma Theory Abbreviated’ Sandra L. Bloom states, “A traumatic experience impacts the entire person-the way we think, the way we learn, the way we remember things, the way we feel about ourselves, the way we feel about other people, and the way we make sense of the world are all profoundly altered by traumatic experience.” (2) Partition affected and changed the lives of these three female characters.

After migrating to Pakistan, Jamshed ends up becoming a rich businessman and his wealth kept growing day by day. Chhoti Bitiya finishes her college in Pakistan and starts working as a school teacher. The sudden shift in the status of the family; from that of the aristocracy to that of low middle class bothers Choti Bitiya and often makes her feel humiliated by the situation in Pakistan. Her father has a stroke and becomes paralyzed. Her brother, Salman, after reaching the new country, lives underground for a year experiencing “a perilous, haphazard life” (214). Their father passes away and Salman is jailed leaving the responsibilities on the tender shoulders of Choti Bitiya (Salma).

Surayya chases the mirage of her union with Salman and arrives at Karachi to find Salman where she eventually learns that “Salman had been sent away from Karachi to some unidentified place for an unidentified length of time” (233). In a house-warming party, Surayya happens to meet Choti Bitiya who is working there as a personal secretary to Jamshed. When



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Jamshed in his drunken state tries to misbehave with Salma, Surayya slaps Jamshed Sayyed on his face amidst a house warming party, like a protective sister in support of Salma Mirza.

Surayya reminds Jamshed that he is not a famous Pakistani tycoon that he has become by chance but a son of a lawyer from Kanpur and belonged to a farmer's family and she is not the great artist Surayya, but Basanti Begum, daughter of another marginal farmer family from a village near that of Jamshed's father, in the Sultanpur district, India. And that they must not forget their roots. Jamshed had divorced his wife Manzur-un-Nisa and later took, Farhat un-Nisa, his daughter from his wife, and left for Pakistan with his mother, brother, and sister. His father, an ascetic, hid somewhere to avoid being taken to Pakistan.

Manzur-un-Nisa, on the other hand, was an obedient future wife. She was tied in a loveless marriage to her cousin, Jamshed, an ambitious young man who had tried desperately (and successfully) to get out of generations of genteel poverty.

Manzur-un-Nisa lived a life of a sacrificing woman who was born to serve her husband and in-laws:

Manzur-un-Nisa took care of all the housework like a machine. She cooked and cleaned and she looked after her mother-in-law and took all her chiding remarks. She was good to her brother-in-law and in great awe of (sister-in-law) Alia. Jamshed never spoke to her pleasantly, but even this did not bother her. It was her duty to serve her husband, and she worshipped him. (143)

For all her pains, she is treated like a doormat by her husband and in-laws:

But after she returned to Mohammad Ganj to bear her first child, Jamshed never called her back to city....Three years passed since the war started. Jamshed became a havildar clerk in the department of military stores. After a year, he was promoted, so he rented out his city house and moved his household to large,



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spacious quarters in the cantonment area. He was making four hundred rupees a month and there was a continuous flow of goods from the canteen. He could not apply for an emergency commission because of his weak eyes, which made him very sad. During this period, after smoking a whole tin of cigarettes in a single night, he sent Manzur-un-Nisa a letter of divorce. (143)

After the divorce, Manzur-un-Nisa gives birth to a daughter, Farhat-un-Nisa, and “barely escaped death in childbirth” (144). Even at her parent’s home she performs all her duties well and works day and night. She waits for a man who unceremoniously divorces her for no fault of hers. Mansur-un-Nisa is treated as less than human, as merely an object for another’s use. In this way, her identity is lost in the man’s world.

These three major female characters, all of them pre-teen girls at the beginning of the novel, and all three are young adults at the time of the Partition. They come from entirely different socio-economic backgrounds and follow three different trajectories in life.

Salma bears resemblance to Sita of the *Sita Betrayed*. Sita has to leave her beloved Sindh and had to come to India but was constantly desirous of her homeland. She kept searching for peace after migration but couldn’t find it anywhere. Salma, just like Sita, leaves all her memories, her people behind, and additionally left all her family’s riches, their history, their forefathers’ graves, mosques, dargahs, and imambarah and comes to a land which was stranger to her, just as Sita. Surayya and Salma act as the main characters of *The Housing Society*. Both experience the change in their fates because of the Post-partition era.

Qurratulain Hyder’s female characters live within a circle that is fully controlled by men, who are the members of a patriarchal society, which beliefs in the institution of domination and exploitation of women. Though her leading ladies are not openly challenging the patriarchy, still they are not bending in the face of it, either. Men and Women both suffered enormously because of the Partition that India faced. It was traumatic for both of them, but women were



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deceived by an extra inch. Women were not only troubled by displacing themselves geographically but also emotionally as they were betrayed by the men in their lives as depicted by Hyder in her writings

Her women characters may not outrightly challenge patriarchy but they also do not succumb to it. The lives of these women are shown to be full of miseries, but they are not seen confused and do not get numbed by the atrocities of society. Sita Mirchandani in *Sita Betrayed* and Surraya in *The Housing Society* becomes the epitome of hope. C.M Naim comments:

Sita Mirchandani in *Sita Betrayed* despite of betrayals of a series of men must remain alive to her own essentially felt need; it is as if, for her, ceasing to search for a shared and lasting experience of love would mean self-annihilation. (151)

Though after several betrayals a void is created in their hearts but they do not lose hope. Making women aware of the 'self' is Hyder's way of empowering her women characters to be strong and resilient to the insensitive happenings around them and not be dependent on others for resolutions, eventually.

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