

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema
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Lecture - 25
Accounts of the Survivor - II

Good morning and welcome to the lecture series on Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema. Today, we are going to continue with our discussion on the Accounts of the Survivor as understood through readings of short stories and fictions, [against] the backdrop of partition. Short stories and fictions produced and written against the backdrop of partition.

Talking about Rajinder Singh Bedi's Lajwanti, it is a short story that explores the plight of the abducted woman during the upheavals [in] the subcontinent (partition in 1947). The entire story is symptomatic of the male obsession and fixity around women's body and sexuality during and after the partition. (Refer Slide Time: 01:36)

Rajinder Singh Bedi: "Lajwanti"

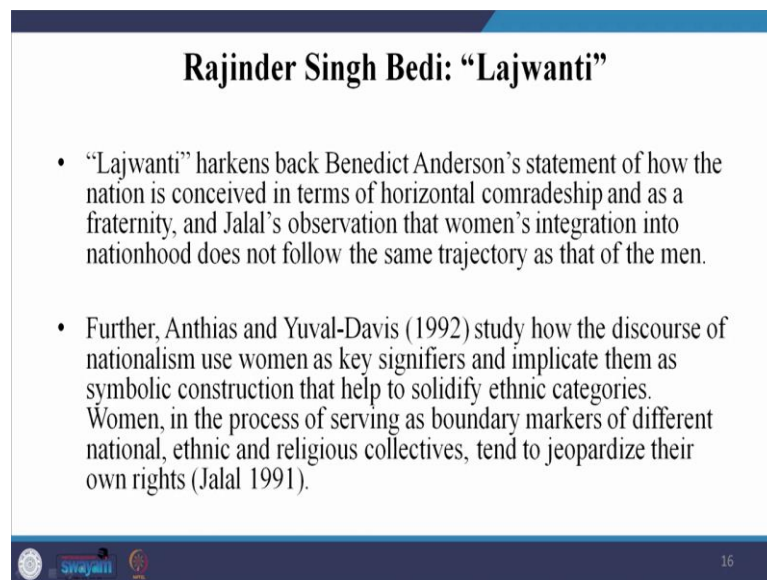
- "Lajwanti" by Rajinder Singh Bedi explores the plight of abducted women during the violence and upheaval of the subcontinent's Partition in 1947.
- Rajinder Singh Bedi's short story "Lajwanti" emphasizes the post-Partition syndrome of extreme obsession with women's body and sexuality.
- Plotline of Bedi's story - Lajo is abducted and taken across the border to Pakistan, where she is raped and forced to live with her rapist. Later, activists rehabilitate her to her home in India. Partition feminists have observed that rehabilitation of abused women to their respective families was a problematic project, with the government taking up a moralistic-paternalistic role in deciding, often without consulting the victim, where and with whom she ought to live. The process of relocating the abducted woman from the "fake" to the "real" family debunked the masculine desire of appropriating and dominating her body, and reducing the body into an identifier of a group.

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The story goes like this - Lajo is a village girl and she is the wife of Sunderlal, one of the prominent men in the village. And, she is abducted and taken across the border to Pakistan, where she is raped and forced to cohabit with her abductor. Later, the activists actually rehabilitate her and bring her back to India. She is reunited with her husband Sunderlal.

Partition feminists observe that rehabilitation of abused women to their respective family was, in fact, a problematic project, where the government's moralistic, paternalistic stance would not often match with what the victim herself wanted. The victim was not given the option of choosing who she wanted to live with and where she wanted to locate herself, where she could identify herself with.

So, this entire process of relocating the abducted woman from the 'false' or 'fake' to the 'real' family was also a way of executing the male desire of appropriating and dominating the woman's body and reducing her body as identifier of a specific group. So, when we read Lajwanti, we are also reminded of what Benedict Anderson said about nation. A nation being conceived through horizontal comradeship and a homosocial bonding and fraternity, where the woman is conspicuously absent. (Refer Slide Time: 03:30)



Rajinder Singh Bedi: "Lajwanti"

- "Lajwanti" harkens back Benedict Anderson's statement of how the nation is conceived in terms of horizontal comradeship and as a fraternity, and Jalal's observation that women's integration into nationhood does not follow the same trajectory as that of the men.
- Further, Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) study how the discourse of nationalism use women as key signifiers and implicate them as symbolic construction that help to solidify ethnic categories. Women, in the process of serving as boundary markers of different national, ethnic and religious collectives, tend to jeopardize their own rights (Jalal 1991).

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In the same way, we see Ayesha Jalal observing that women's integration into nationhood does not follow the same trajectory as the males. Further, [Floya] Anthias and [Nira] Yuval-Davis would study how this discourse of nationalism use women as

key signifiers and implicate them as symbolic construction, which in turn help to solidify ethnic categories.

So, women in the process of serving as boundary markers tend to jeopardize their own positions and their own rights. In the current time-space of the story, we see that Lajo is an abducted and repatriated woman and she is a taboo-ridden figure. And so, her husband Sunderlal is distraught with a sense of insecurity, and yet he is trying to hide the discomfort that he feels upon her coming back.

Once Lajo is taken away, she is abducted, Sunderlal throws himself into social work. He actually defends the idea that women should be taken into the fold of family, they should be treated with dignity and respect; because it is not their fault that they are abducted. And so, SunderLal really ... we see that he thinks of Lajwanti...of the times that they spent together.

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Rajinder Singh Bedi: "Lajwanti"

- In the current time-space of the story, Lajo, an abducted and repatriated woman, is a taboo-ridden figure, whose husband Sunderlal tries to hide his discomfort upon her coming back. The author tells the readers that Lajo had tattooed her body when she was a child. Although it is possible that Lajo had involuntarily participated in this practice, her tattooed body is a part of a shared custom.
- Contrarily, after her marriage, Lajo's body becomes a personal possession that can be rightfully demanded and desired, controlled and explored, enjoyed and abused by her husband Sunderlal. As Sunderlal discovers each of her tattoos in details, the tattoos, besides their aesthetic meaning, gain an erotic dimension. They represent the romance in Sunderlal and Lajo's conjugal relationship, and testify to the memory that the two have exclusively shared.

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But that is distinctly different, it is a different situation; it is a distinctly different situation from when Lajwanti comes back in actuality. And, Sunderlal basically has to practice what he had been preaching all this while. We see in the story that he would go out on Prabhat Pheris, he would question orthodox positions.

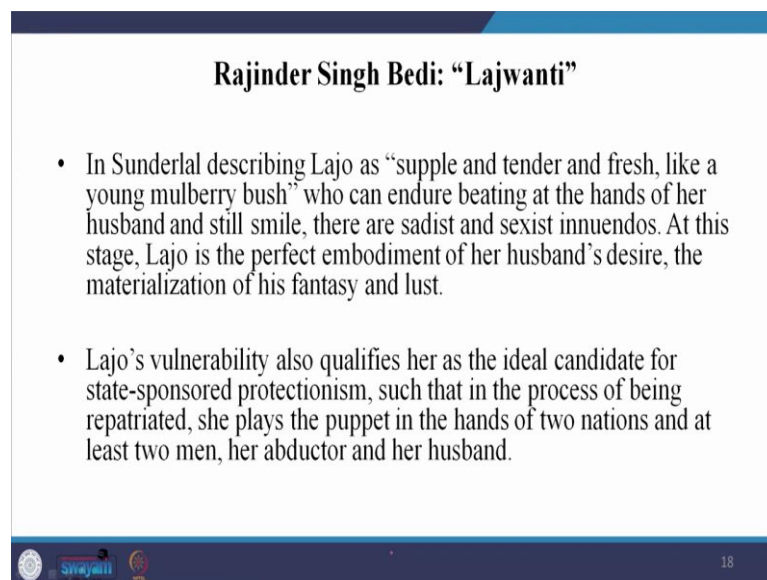
You know the orthodox positions betrayed by some of his fellow villagers, who said that like Ram had not taken back Sita, the abducted women should not be taken back.

And, he actually challenges that, he says that these women are not at fault; they ought to be treated with respect. But things become very different, like I said, once his own estranged wife is sent back to his home.

So, the author tells the readers that Lajo had tattooed her body when she was a child. Lajo had several tattoos on her bodies. These tattoos, which are generally seen as parts of a shared custom in an Indian setting...they hold very different meanings after Lajo's marriage with Sunderlal. Lajo's body after her marriage becomes a personal possession. And, it can be rightfully demanded, it can be desired, it can be explored, controlled and it can be abused at Sunderlal's will.

Sunderlal discovers tattoos and in her absence when she is taken away, he is remembering the physical aspects of Lajwanti. We see that these tattoos, besides their aesthetic dimension, they also gain erotic meanings. They represent the romance between Sunderlal and Lajo, and they testify to the memory that the two have exclusively shared. So, Sunderlal describes Lajo as supple and tender like a young mulberry bush, as a person that could endure beating at the hands of her husband and still smile.

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Rajinder Singh Bedi: "Lajwanti"

- In Sunderlal describing Lajo as "supple and tender and fresh, like a young mulberry bush" who can endure beating at the hands of her husband and still smile, there are sadist and sexist innuendos. At this stage, Lajo is the perfect embodiment of her husband's desire, the materialization of his fantasy and lust.
- Lajo's vulnerability also qualifies her as the ideal candidate for state-sponsored protectionism, such that in the process of being repatriated, she plays the puppet in the hands of two nations and at least two men, her abductor and her husband.

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In these descriptions in Sunderlal's remembrance, there are sexist and sadist innuendoes. At this stage, we understand that Lajwanti as Sunderlal's wife was an exclusive [and] a perfect embodiment of the husband's desire and she was a manifestation of his fantasy and lust.

She is also the ideal candidate of state sponsored protectionism because she is docile. She internalizes the idea that a male is masculine enough only when he beats up his wife, otherwise not. Actually, Lajo takes pride in the fact that Sunderlal beats her. It is an expression of the husband's love and control over the wife. Lajo or a docile woman like her, who endorses and internalizes and repeats the patriarchal ideas, is a puppet in the hands of two nations.

She becomes a puppet in the hands of at least two men - one being her husband, who used to beat her before her abduction when she was happily married with him, and later a puppet in the hands of the abductor. When a fellow villager brings the news of Lajo's return at the Indo-Pakistan border, the significance of her tattoos suddenly change. Sunderlal and the messenger are trying to confirm that it is, in fact, Lajo in a crowd of other abducted women, through discussing her tattoos. (Refer Slide Time: 10:35)

Rajinder Singh Bedi: "Lajwanti"

- When a fellow villager brings the news of Lajo's return at the Indo-Pakistan border, the significance of her tattoos suddenly change. Sunderlal and this messenger try to confirm Lajo's identity in a crowd of other abducted women, by discussing her tattoos.
- In allowing such an intricate discussion to happen in the absence of Lajo, Sunderlal compromises the privacy of her body to a complete stranger. As he enquires about her as though she is an outsider to him, his sense of possession of her is replaced by a sense of disowning. Sunderlal's act betrays his feeling that a rehabilitated woman's body can be treated as a public object of judgment. Rather than situate her within the familial coordinates, he imagines her as an individual of national concern.

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This is something very significant in the story. When such an intricate discussion is happening in the absence of Lajo and in a public forum, we see Sunderlal is compromising the privacy of Lajo's body to a complete stranger. So, a husband that was

so possessive of her at one point shows a sense of disowning her. He is inquiring to a fellow villager, a man about Lajo, as though she is an outsider to him now.

So, here Sunderlal's act betrays his feeling, that a rehabilitated woman's body can be treated as a public object of judgment or discussion. It is very difficult to again re-situate a woman like Lajo within the familial coordinates. So, now, Sunderlal becomes a national actor that imagines her as an individual of national concern. As a husband, Sunderlal is succumbing to and partakes in the social process of opening up her bodily exclusivity to the public knowledge.

We see that Sunderlal is actually complying with the larger scheme of rehabilitation. A woman that has been known by at least two men, a woman has been made to cohabit with a man other than her husband can be sliced up through a homosocial discourse. Lajo is being sliced up through a homosocial discourse because she is not in the custody of a single male guardian. So, as a recovered commodity, Lajo is disposed to multiple male gazes and her body is available for deconstruction and shared analysis.

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Rajinder Singh Bedi: "Lajwanti"

- In this, he as a husband succumbs to, and in fact, partakes in the social process of opening up of her bodily exclusivity to the public knowledge, thereby complying with the larger scheme of rehabilitation. Like the national actors, Sunderlal also thinks that it is acceptable to slice up a female body through a homosocial discourse, if it is no longer in the custody of a single male guardian.
- As a recovered commodity, Lajo, along with her tattoos are disposed to multiple male gazes and are available for everybody to deconstruct and analyze. From being Sunderlal's coveted wife to becoming a war-prize of an unknown male and later, recovered as a national asset, Lajo is subjected to curious scrutiny. She is branded as a superior item of exchange that Pakistan resents returning and India takes pride in claiming back.

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So, people are analyzing her, discussing her. From being Sunderlal's coveted wife to becoming a war prize of an unknown male and afterwards being recovered as a national asset; Lajo is subjected to curious scrutiny. She is branded as a superior item of exchange, a commodity that Pakistan resents returning and India takes pride in claiming back.

So, partition becomes a site of unmaking a village woman, a docile, meek woman such as Lajo. It unmakes her sense of self and distinctiveness. When we talk about Sunderlal's body burning with an unknown fear, it refers not only to his jealousy, but also his sense of insecurity, his apprehension in the face of the moral obligation and dilemma of having to accommodate his now estranged wife.

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Rajinder Singh Bedi: "Lajwanti"

- For Lajo, Partition is thus a site of unmaking of her self and distinctiveness. Sunderlal's body "burn[ing] with an unknown fear" refers not only to his jealousy as a husband, but also his apprehension and insecurity in the face of the moral obligation of having to accommodate his abducted wife, an estranged body and relation now, within the familiar space of household.
- It is a double paradox that Lajo's docile and a much-regulated body has suddenly been resigned as an unclaimed terrain, just as Sunderlal's desirous recollection of her familiar body is overwhelmed by the fear of what he imagines as alien. The same tattoos that once defined Lajo in terms of 'righteousness' and 'beauty' become signifiers of 'trespassing' and 'immodesty' because her body, albeit unwillingly, has crossed the threshold of the standard codes of behavior through cohabiting with a man other than her husband.

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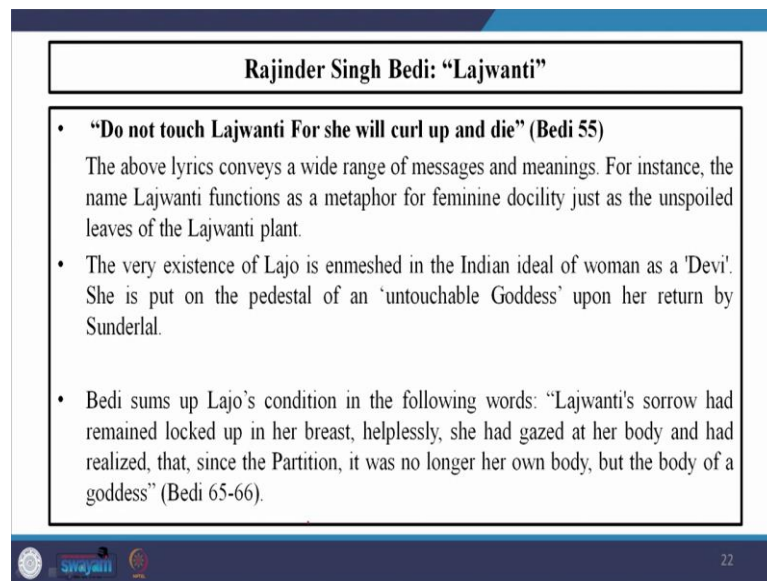
She is now an unfamiliar person to him, as good as unknown, and now she has to be brought back within the fold of / within the familiar space of the household. It is actually a double paradox that Lajo's much regulated body has suddenly become an unknown terrain for Sunderlal. It is an unclaimed terrain as almost no one wants to claim it, but it is an aspect of Sunderlal's character where he has this moral obligation.

He had been preaching earlier about bringing back the abducted women, [so] that now he is almost obliged to take back his own wife in order to not contradict himself. He imagines her as alien, we would know why. If we look at her tattoos, as a reader if we try to understand how the meanings of these tattoos change...They were earlier signs or

symbols of her righteousness, her beauty, but now they are signifiers...after the woman is brought back, she is repatriated, they become signifiers of trespassing and immodesty, although she does not [willingly elope]...I mean because her body, albeit unwillingly, has crossed the threshold of standard codes of behavior. So, it is a kind of problematic reunion between the husband and the wife. Bedi is actually talking about a folk song on the Lajwanti plant - "Do not touch Lajwanti for she will curl up and die." These lyrics convey a wide range of messages and meanings.

What happens to a docile village woman like Lajo when several men touch her? So, the name Lajwanti functions as a metaphor of feminine docility. She represents the unspoiled leaves, the untouched leaves of the Lajwanti plant.

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Rajinder Singh Bedi: "Lajwanti"

- **"Do not touch Lajwanti For she will curl up and die" (Bedi 55)**
The above lyrics conveys a wide range of messages and meanings. For instance, the name Lajwanti functions as a metaphor for feminine docility just as the unspoiled leaves of the Lajwanti plant.
- The very existence of Lajo is enmeshed in the Indian ideal of woman as a 'Devi'. She is put on the pedestal of an 'untouchable Goddess' upon her return by Sunderlal.
- Bedi sums up Lajo's condition in the following words: "Lajwanti's sorrow had remained locked up in her breast, helplessly, she had gazed at her body and had realized, that, since the Partition, it was no longer her own body, but the body of a goddess" (Bedi 65-66).

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In the end, we see that Lajo is enmeshed in the Indian ideal of woman as Devi. However, treatment as a Devi does not give her more respect; it is a way of putting her on the pedestal of the Untouchable goddess, and it is a way of desexualizing her; denying her desire or sexuality. She is actually treated as someone that is a superhuman, that has transcended all normal human conditions.

Bedi sums up Lajo's condition in the following words: "Lajwanti's sorrow had remained locked up in her breast, helplessly she had gazed at her body and had realized that since the partition, it was no longer her body, but the body of a goddess." So, we see that

Sunderlal cannot outright reject her. There is a kind of wall between the husband and the wife.

Sunderlal himself is also indirectly a victim of this project of rehabilitation, where he cannot face up to the fragment that has happened within himself. He is preaching something he cannot execute and practice when it comes to his own wife. There is a kind of opacity in the conjugal relation.

[In fact], there is no conjugal relation. In the absence of conjugal relationship there is a kind of opacity where Lajo, in fact, cannot talk about her previous experiences with the abductor and his family in Pakistan. We see that there is this comparison, a constant parallel that is drawn between Sunderlal and Lajwanti's relationship with that of Ram and Sita.

Both Sita and Lajwanti were abducted by the enemy. But, unlike Ram, Sunderlal accepts his rescued wife. However, what happens after this acceptance is actually a fact that remains within the precincts of home. It is the pain of the woman that is treated as the Untouchable goddess, a version or a testimony that does not get recorded within the official historiography, within the male project of rehabilitation.

When Sunderlal addresses Lajwanti as Devi, there is an attempt at erasing her identity and her everyday experiences with the other community. She is not allowed by Sunderlal to share anything from her past, although maybe that would have lightened her. But, there could be insecurity or male ego that prevents Sunderlal from conversing or communicating with Lajwanti as a husband and not as a national actor.

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Rajinder Singh Bedi: "Lajwanti"

- Besides this, Bedi draws belaboring comparisons between the conjugal pair of Sunderlal and Lajwanti with that depicted in 'The Ramayana'. The character of Lajo is formed as a parallel to that of Sita, both of whom were abducted by the enemy. But, on the other hand, a perceivable contrast can be observed between Sunderlal and Rama where unlike the latter, Sunderlal accepts his rescued wife even after visualizing the opposite(Lohia).
- Sunder Lal addresses Lajwanti as 'devi' or goddess, which attempts to erase her identity, agency and everyday experiences with the other community. While he places the 'blame' for the stigma attached to Lajwanti's honour on social conventions, he also invalidates any occasion to overcome these conventions.
- The narrative suggests about that the ambivalent terms of Lajwanti's reintegration into the community and nation-state.

So, he is placing the blame for the stigma attached to Lajwanti's honor on the existing social conventions, and yet he is not powerful enough to invalidate these conventions. He is not powerful enough to overcome these conventions. So, the narrative suggests about the ambivalent terms, the problematic terms of Lajwanti's reintegration into the community and nation-state.

With this, I would like to conclude today's lecture and we will meet again for another round of discussions.

Thank you.