

INTERPRETING WOMEN AND THEIR BODIES IN THE CONTEXT OF ETHNIC GENOCIDE

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the issue of violence against women during the communal riots that followed the Partition of India in 1947. The gender-specific reading of partition genocide facilitates a discussion on various forms of violence that targeted women and the symbolic meanings behind these acts. In addition, the paper explores the notion of nation as “mother” and its ideological implications for female citizens. Furthermore, the paper highlights the issue of abducted women, the recovery and rehabilitation programmes undertaken by the state to rescue them, and the working ideology behind the state’s actions. Arguably, the paper, taken in its entirety, allows for a more nuanced understanding of how in the name of religious/national pride, women’s bodies and sexuality were, and are, either regulated or exploited in patriarchal societies. It is through women that an ethnic community or nation-state demonstrates its sense of purity and honour. As a result, women turn into mute objects stripped of individual autonomy, of control over their bodies and lives.

Keywords: Indian Partition, ethnic violence, violence against women, South Asia, patriarchy, female sexuality, national honour, feminism, religion.

Resumen

Este artículo aborda la violencia sufrida por las mujeres durante las revueltas comunitarias que surgieron como consecuencia de la Partición de la India en 1947 y realiza un estudio de género sobre los tipos de violencia contra las mujeres, analizando el significado simbólico que subyace a los mismos. El artículo explora conjuntamente la idea de la nación como madre y sus implicaciones ideológicas sobre las mujeres del país a la vez que estudia los casos de las mujeres secuestradas, los programas de recuperación y rehabilitación por parte del Estado, y la ideología que influyó en estas medidas. El trabajo explica también cómo la pureza étnica de una comunidad o nación se regula y explota a través de los cuerpos y la sexualidad de la mujer en nombre de la religión y del orgullo nacional. Así, concluye que se reduce a la mujer a la condición de objeto sin voz en este genocidio étnico, y se la despoja de cualquier autonomía individual sobre su cuerpo y su vida.

Received 18/12/15 – Accepted 30/03/16

Palabras clave: Partición de la India, violencia étnica, violencia contra la mujer, Sudeste asiático, patriarcado, sexualidad femenina, honor nacional, feminismo, religión.

After more than two hundred years of British colonisation, India attained its independence on 15 August 1947. However, the euphoria of finally attaining freedom after years of struggle was quickly dismantled when this independence was accompanied by the partition of the Indian Subcontinent into East and West Pakistan and India. The splitting of the country is considered by many as the last, departing blow of the British towards the Indians. However, reasons behind the partition were varied and complex. Out of the several factors that can explain this watershed moment in South Asian history, this paper focuses on the issue of *gendered violence* in the communal riots that took place during the partition. This ethnic genocide witnessed two kinds of gender-based violence. Firstly, the violence inflicted on women by men of the opposite religious group that involved kidnapping, rape, and mutilation of the genitalia or public humiliation. The supposed aim of this kind of violence was to abase the men of the rival religion to which the women belonged. A second form of violence against women included the violence inflicted on women by their own family members. This could vary from honour killings to the insistence of male kin that their mothers, daughters, or wives commit suicide in order to safeguard the purity and chastity of the community. Both forms of violence substantiate the claim that women were not treated as humans but rather as markers of communal and national pride. Primary sources of my paper are various women-centric studies undertaken by Indian feminist socio-historians such as Kamla Basin, Ritu Menon, and Urvashi Butalia, who have written extensively on partition violence. Basin, Menon, and Butalia (among other scholars) argue that the primary motive behind violence against women was familial, national, and religious honour. By applying this feminist approach to the Indian partition, my attempt here will be to identify and decipher the operative ideology behind gendered violence during the religious massacres that occurred in the aftermath of partition. Moreover, I will briefly discuss the recovery and rehabilitation programmes undertaken by the governments of India and Pakistan to bring back the abducted women from both sides of the border. The ideology behind this rescue mission was not simply to bring justice to the victims but also to return the women to where they rightfully belonged, i.e. with male kin of the same religion.

The Radcliffe Award, the name given to the borders drawn to divide India to create Pakistan, affected regions that had around 100 million inhabitants. The state of Punjab on the northwest and Bengal on the east were split to create West and East Pakistan respectively. The partition of India saw one of the

biggest migrations in history. Menon and Bhasin claim that approximately eight to ten million had crossed borders with a death toll of 500,000 to 1,000,000 lives (1998: 35). While Butalia writes in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998: 76, 3) that twelve million people migrated and that death counts varied between 200,000 to two million people, it is commonly agreed upon that over a million lost their lives during the exodus. The official history of partition abounds with similar figures and statistics, but after nearly seventy years of independence, there undoubtedly still remain certain aspects that are usually left out of the grand narrative and which can only be found in memoirs and partition fiction. One of them is the aspect of nostalgia; the loss of homeland for millions who were violently uprooted and made to migrate to an unknown land that claimed to be their new country. Since the two countries divided citizens based on who was a Hindu/Sikh and who was a Muslim, all other aspects of one's identity such as culture, language, local customs, etc. were shrouded by religious megalomania. The homeless refugees lost not only their motherland, but friendships were broken, bonds were severed, and the idea of *home* itself was altered. The trauma caused by partition is described beautifully by author Ismat Chughtai in the following words:

Those whose bodies were whole had hearts that were splintered. Families were torn apart . . . The bonds of human relationship were in tatters, and in the end many souls remained behind in Hindustan¹ while their bodies started off for Pakistan. (qtd. in Bhalla 2007: 189)

Chughtai's statement views partition beyond facts, dates and numbers, and political events. It reflects the damaging effects of partition on the masses. Butalia states that the refugees' "experience of dislocation and trauma [that] shaped their lives . . . find[s] little reflection in written history" (1998: 9). Gradually, as stories and testimonials on personal experiences of partition as endured by the common people started to surface, we were given the opportunity to witness the partition of India through various lenses. However, upon attempting to investigate the situation of women and their role during this period of great ethnic turmoil, these inquiries were met with a stark void. It would be untrue to claim that women are entirely absent from partition history. However, we only see them in history books as numbers and as "objects of study, rather than as subjects" (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 11). Hence, it is crucial to engage in a gendered reading of partition because when one looks at the official/master narrative of this watershed moment, the silence enforced

¹Chughtai uses the term Hindustan for India.

upon women and their experiences is glaring. Women's absence as subjects of history is due to the fact that "they are presumed to be outside history because they are outside the public and the political, where history is made. Consequently, they have no part in it" (Menon 2004: 3). Over the last few decades, bringing forth various women-centric partition narratives into the historical retelling of partition has challenged this aspect. For instance, Butalia in her essay "Community, State and Gender: Some Reflections on the Partition of India" (1994: 128-129) cites a pamphlet by an activist group called Women Against Fundamentalism:

I am a woman / I want to raise my voice / because communalism affects me / In every communal riot / my sisters are raped, my children are killed . . . / my world is destroyed/ and then / I am left to pick up the pieces . . . / It matters little if I am a Muslim, Hindu or Sikh / and yet I cannot help my sisters.

Violence is almost always instigated by men, but its greatest impact is felt by women. In violent conflict, it is women who are raped, women who are widowed . . . in the name of national integrity and unity . . . We women will have no part of this madness, and we will suffer it no more . . . Those who see their manhood in taking up arms, can be the protectors of no one and nothing.

The pamphlet not only succinctly locates women within the framework of partition violence but also raises a strong voice against forcefully assigning roles to women as bearers of "national integrity and unity." Furthermore, in order to grasp the magnitude of violence against women, one must begin with looking at available facts and numbers. Menon and Bhasin in their book *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* claim that the official number of abducted women stood at 50,000 for Muslim women kidnapped by Hindu and Sikh men on their way to Pakistan, while 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women were abducted as they attempted to migrate to India (1998: 70). Butalia in her book *The Other Side of Silence* gives similar numbers; she claims that a total of 75,000 women were abducted from both sides of the border (1998: 3). It is also very likely that the actual numbers might be a lot higher than the official estimate found in books and archives.

As stated previously, there were two forms of violence against women during partition. The first form was violence inflicted on women by men of the rival religious group. The most common ways in which this type of violence was manifested on female bodies included mutilation or branding of genitalia with religious symbols, ripping out their wombs, being paraded naked on the

streets or in places of religious worship, and finally, rape. Moreover, it must be asserted that every violent act served as a metaphor that was “an indicator of the place that women’s sexuality occupie[d] in an all-male, patriarchal arrangement of gender relations, between and within religious or ethnic communities” (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 41). The violent acts on women’s bodies were not targeted at them as individuals. In fact, women’s mutilated and raped bodies were a way to send out a threat to the men of the religious group to which the women belonged. A woman’s body became a site where one group tried to prove its religious supremacy over the other. Jisha Menon in *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition* explains the relevance of the female body in communal conflict. She states (2013: 121): “The female body served as the terrain through which to exchange dramatic acts of violence. The gendered violence of the Partition thus positioned women between symbolic abstraction and embodiment.” Moreover, when one interprets the symbolic meanings behind various violent acts, one can claim that branding a woman’s body with symbols of the other country or religious group implies that the woman has been tainted by the sinful religious Other. Branding becomes a permanent reminder for the woman, whose shame at losing her honour remains forever ingrained on her body. Also, the parading of naked women at places of worship is a double-edged attack; it is the simultaneous humiliation of one’s religion and of women, who are meant to safeguard the purity of that religion. Amputating breasts, burning vaginas and ripping out wombs serve an even more sinister purpose. For Menon and Bhasin (1998: 44), these acts “desexualise a woman and negate her as wife and mother; no longer a nurturer.” In a culture that continues to see women as only fit to be mothers and caretakers in their husbands’ households, amputating women’s sexual organs essentially makes their very existence inconsequential.

Extending the notion that a woman’s primary role is considered to be her role as mother, it can be asserted that the concept of motherhood is also intertwined with the idea of nation. In fact, one may note that India is commonly referred to as *Bharatmata* or Mother India. The country is seen as the *metaphorical mother* where the land is her body that has already been violated and severed by the creation of Pakistan. The women of India, or for that matter, women of any country, are seen as *literal mothers* who are responsible for bearing citizens of the country to ensure the continuity of national inheritance. Deniz Kandiyoti in her essay “Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation” (1991: 1490) states that “[w]omen bear the burden of being ‘mother of the nation’ . . . as well as being those who reproduce the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, who transmit the culture and who are the privileged signifiers of national difference.” Women’s ideological position as markers of national and religious pride inversely assigns them a diminutive social role where their value is only limited to their functioning reproductive

organs that should be used and regulated as dictated by the patriarchal society. Hence, the portrayal of Mother India as a woman clad in a red sari serves a similar purpose within the nation building allegory. It can be said that Mother India is

the inviolable essence of the nation in the making, and as such she is imagined as the cherished and venerable mother who presides over her home that is deemed as the last bastion of autonomy and authenticity in a world that has been made over by the work of empire and colonialism . . . Mother India is all too visible and conspicuous as the artistic labors of visual patriotism render her as a public woman for all woman to behold and revere. (Ramaswamy 2010: 75)

This explains how Mother India is a construct made by a postcolonial nation that firstly, creates an archetypal figure of a *good* Indian woman seen in direct opposition to the negative stereotype of Western women. Secondly, this metaphorical mother becomes a role model for all women of the country, reminding them of their primary purpose of bearing citizens for the motherland. The great Mother India is kept alive and strong by the actual mothers of India. For instance, it can be asserted that the nation itself masquerades as a family, and “the ‘natural’ subjugation of wife to husband . . . within the family is alleged to mirror, and hence make also ‘natural,’ the subjugation of women and other minorities within the national realm” (Kamau-Rutenberg 2008: 27). As motherhood becomes a matter of nationalist agenda, women are denied autonomous control of their bodies and reproductive organs.

If a nation is considered a mother, it automatically becomes the feminine within the male/female dichotomy. This gendering of nation legitimises the idea that nation as mother/woman needs to be protected by its (male) citizens from evil outsiders, thereby sanctioning communal wars. Nation as a feminine entity is a common trait of nationalist imagination. For instance, on 14 August 1947 –the day Pakistan declared its independence– *The Organiser*, a magazine owned by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (an extreme right-wing Hindu political party), published a picture of Mother India. The illustration consisted of the map of India on which lay a woman with her right limb severed, symbolising the newly carved out Pakistan from the body of Mother India while Jawaharlal Nehru² loomed over the woman with a bloody knife in hand (Butalia, 1998: 189). A similar political illustration can be found in Sukeishi Kamra’s *Bearing*

² Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) was the first Prime Minister of India and a prominent member of the Indian National Congress.

Witness: Partition, Independence, and the End of the Raj (2002: 77), in which a woman is pictured inside of a magician's box, labelled Pakistan on one side and Hindustan on the other, and is being sawed in half by Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah³. Hence, it can be said that the nation is imagined as a woman who has been mutilated by partition. This metaphorical mutilation finds repetition in multiple assaults on women's bodies in a literal sense. In this context, rape becomes the ultimate act of shaming a woman and, as an extension, the religious community to which she belongs. Furthermore, Shumona Dasgupta in her essay "The Extraordinary and the Everyday: Locating Violence in Women's Narratives of the Partition" (2015: 46) claims that violence against women was a way for the men to reclaim their masculinity. Dasgupta states:

Partition was coded as a failure of the male nationalist to protect the political integrity of the nation, as well as the inability of Hindu and Sikh men to protect their women. This led to a very violent compensatory performance of . . . masculinity. Women were accommodated within the disciplinary parameters of a neo-nationalist discourse, only if they consented to be objects of violence.

Extending Dasgupta's argument, one can claim that women became "objects of violence," since their bodies were anchored to the ideology of religious and national honour. It can be said that "women's bodies represent[ed] the 'purity' of the nation and thus [were] guarded heavily by men, an attack on these bodies [became] an attack on nation's men" (Mayer 2000: 18). Hence, a woman's body needed to be protected from penetration by the religious Other because it would *soil* the woman.

Usually, rape and sexual assault were invariably followed by abduction of the victimised women. These abducted women typically became domestic servants and sex slaves. Many abducted women were sold into prostitution and some, in very rare instances, were married to their abductors and later claimed to be leading happy and respectable lives. The issue of abducted women was so widespread that the governments of India and Pakistan established the Inter-Dominion Agreement on November 1947 for the recovery of abducted women from both sides of the border. To begin with, 9,000 women were recovered from India and over 5,500 from Pakistan during the first year of the Recovery Act. By December 1949, the numbers had risen to 12,500 Muslim women recovered from India and over 6,200 Hindu and Sikh women from Pakistan

³ Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876-1948) was the leader of All India Muslim League and the first Governor-General of Pakistan.

(Menon and Bhasin 1998: 69-70). The ideology behind the recovery act was not simply to bring the abducted women back home but to ensure that the women were returned to their male family members. For instance, Stephen Morton in his essay “Violence, Gender and Partition in the Narration of the South Asian Nation” (2012: 48) states that “[a]lthough . . . the recovery process might seem like a worthy cause that counteracts the abduction and violation of women, it is also complicit in the maintenance of national boundaries and discourses of ethnic purity.” As previously mentioned, a woman’s primary role was considered to be her role as mother and it was through motherhood that her sexuality was validated and controlled. As a result, when a woman was raped and/or abducted, it can be stated that her “sexuality was no longer comprehensible, or acceptable” (Butalia 1998: 190). To elaborate more on the topic, Butalia states (1998: 190):

How could motherhood be thus defiled? . . . [H]ow could families, the community, the nation — indeed, how could men allow this state of affairs to continue? The women had to be brought back, they had to be “purified” . . . and they had to be relocated into the family and the community.

For Indians, the abduction of their women was seen as a double blow. Having already lost a part of their country to Pakistan, they simply could not let their women be taken away as well. Therefore, this recovery act was seen as a way to reclaim, what appeared to be, the Indian men’s “emasculated, weakened manhood” (Butalia 1998: 190). Land lost to Pakistan could not be recovered. Hence, it became all the more important for Hindu men to bring back their Hindu women as a desperate attempt and as a saving grace for their Hindu manhood. Boundaries are not just physical, but “a national boundary can be imagined in men’s minds or drawn within women’s bodies” (Mayer 2004: 166).

To demonstrate how the abducted women were treated by the rescue mission, one must refer to the Recovery Bill itself. The Recovery Bill stated that any Muslim woman found in India with a Hindu man after 1 March 1947 and before 1 January 1949 shall be considered abducted. One of the distinctive clauses of the bill states:

Conversions by persons abducted after March 1947 will not be recognized and all such persons MUST be restored to their respective Dominions. The wishes of the [abducted] persons concerned are irrelevant and consequently no statements of such persons should be recorded before Magistrates. (qtd. in Butalia 1994: 140)

The clause ensured that the abducted women did not have a voice and were not given a chance to make a choice as citizens because “the women were important only as objects, bodies to be recovered and returned to their ‘owners’ in the place where they ‘belonged’” (Mookerjea-Leonard 2015: 13). They were simply whisked away by the two governments to fulfil the demands of the religious community and patriarchal state⁴. The refusal to grant autonomy and decision-making power to abducted women is explained by Jisha Menon in the following lines:

[T]he Bill clearly disregarded the interests of these “abducted” women and had little interest in ascertaining whether these women had any desire to return to their original families. The Abducted Persons Act . . . divested these women of any legal rights to choose where they wanted to stay and with whom, and violated their fundamental rights as citizens. (qtd. in Gangpadhyay 2015: 5)

Menon’s words faithfully capture how the governments treated these women as mute objects to be bartered between the two nations. One must also note that many women refused to be recovered and insisted on staying with their abductors. The women who refused to return to their previous families found themselves doubly victimised. These women were first abducted by men belonging to the rival religious group, and then they were forcefully made to return to their male kin of their own religion. In both cases, they had no freedom to make a choice. Furthermore, attempting to understand the reasons behind a woman’s decision to stay with her adductor, it can be concluded that it stems from a woman’s awareness of her now altered social status, which would mark her as unacceptable, ostracising her from the community to which she would return. The very fact that a woman would rather choose to live with her rapist/abductor strongly reflects how powerfully the patriarchal state stresses the regulation of women’s sexuality and the extreme measures the state takes to moderate it. For instance, a victim of rape will see her own body as polluted and her respectability in the society, nullified, and will more or less voluntarily accept or resign herself to an ostracised position in society.

To further develop the argument on abducted women, here I include an interesting perspective given by Anis Kidwai (a social worker involved in the Recovery Programme) on the issue of abducted women refusing to return to

⁴Moreover, the vagueness of the bill nullified many inter-religious marriages that were indeed genuine, which ironically led to the breaking up of happy families.

their families. Kidwai challenges the definition of an abductor in entirely negative terms. She states: “Rescuing her from the horror this good man has brought her to his home. He is giving her respect, he offers to marry her. How can she not become his slave for life?” (qtd. in Butalia 1994: 144). Kidwai suggests the possibility that the alleged abductor could indeed have rescued the woman from falling prey to other men. However, the last line in the aforementioned quote is not bereft of sarcasm and demonstrates how patriarchal ideology makes a woman believe that a man is necessary for her existence. Hence, during the time of communal riots, when women were separated from their families and abducted in the process, many women began to see their abductors as saviours. The female dependency on men to survive was so deeply ingrained in the minds of women that an abductor easily took the place of the husband/father in a woman’s life.

Continuing my commentary on the recovery of abducted women (whether willingly or forcefully), one may note that the process did not simply end with bringing the women back to their families. On the contrary, many families refused to take their daughters and wives back by claiming that the rescued women had been polluted by the religious Other. A woman without her chastity and her purity had no place in the patriarchal scheme of things. As a result, “the State, so quick to come forward with its recovery was at a loss about the reintegration of these women into the new nation” (Butalia 1994: 145). Many women were grudgingly accepted back because their families simply needed someone to do the housework (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 77). Many political leaders and social workers used their influence and urged the families to take the recovered women back. For instance, it is interesting to note that Gandhi (after pre-partition Noakhali riots in 1946 and even during the early stages of violence post partition) as a response to various instances of mass suicides and honour killings had expressed views such as: “I have heard that many women who did not want to lose their honor chose to die. Many men killed their own wives. I think that is really great, because I know that such things make India brave” (qtd. in Mookerjee-Leonard 2015: 32). However, as several thousand rescued women were now being refused by their families (therefore making them the responsibility of the state), Gandhi radically changed his views and claimed:

It is being said that the families of the abducted women no longer want to receive them back. It would be a barbarian husband or a barbarian parent who would say that he would not take back his wife or daughter. . . . They had been subjected to violence. To put a blot on them and to say that they are no longer fit to be accepted in society is unjust. (qtd. in Guha 2011: 275)

Gandhi's plea, along with that of many other political leaders and social workers, does echo the humanitarian cause of providing support and comfort to women who suffer physical and emotional trauma.

Moving on to yet another factor that complicated matters even further after the recovery of the abducted women; one must point to the fact that many of these women had been impregnated or had already given birth to children of their abductors by the time they were rescued. When recovered by the government, in order to be accepted back into their families, the women had to abandon these (what one may call) mixed-blood children. Again, especially for Hindus, who functioned more strictly on purity and segregation codes than Muslims, it was unimaginable for them to accept a woman with a Muslim man's child who would be a constant reminder of the woman's and the religion's shame and dishonour. A Hindu woman who had been forcefully converted into a Muslim could be converted back. However, a child who was born half Hindu and half Muslim belonged nowhere. This resulted in thousands of destitute children who became wards of the state. Many were adopted simply for the purpose of domestic help and the predominant gender bias surfaced again when male children were preferred over girls (Butalia 1998: 250). Opinions were divided regarding who should keep the children. Many politicians believed that as per the guardianship laws, the child belonged to the father, and therefore must be left behind. Much like a wife, a child too was seen as the property of the man, despite the fact that the father was, in all likelihood, the abductor and rapist of the mother. Many mothers did not want to leave their children behind. Therefore, in order to enable the mothers to keep their children, the criterion for an abducted person was redefined in the Recovery Bill in 1949 as "a male child under the age of sixteen years or a female of whatever age" (qtd. in Menon and Bhasin 1998: 116). Hence, now these children too fell in the category of abducted persons and were recovered along with their mothers. Unfortunately, many of these rescued children were later abandoned at orphanages. Many expecting mothers underwent (illegal) abortions. As this was not just a singular case of pregnancy out of wedlock making a mockery of sexual codes of conduct expected from women but something more resentfully sinful: these pregnancies were the proof of defilement by the religious Other who had polluted the women's community and nation by impregnating them with his impure seed.

The recovery programme was followed by a rehabilitation programme. Here, I will briefly outline certain facts related to the rehabilitation programme to make the reader familiar with the historical background. To begin with, Butalia in her essay "Questions of Sexuality and Citizenship during Partition" (1997: 97) claims that post recovery, there were 75,000 unattached women.

Unattached by the state's definition meant any woman who did not have menfolk to provide for and protect her. Therefore, widows (without adult sons) became *permanent liabilities*. Moreover, single unattached women were also considered the state's responsibility until they were married off or became financially independent through the means of state-arranged employment. Rehabilitation Centres also took care of education of young children and along with lodging, provided financial aid to the women. Menon and Bhasin (1998: 152) concisely describe the primary tasks of the centres:

[R]un production and training centres; organize the sale of articles produced in work centres; run schools; arrange for the adoption of orphaned children; give financial or other aid to women; assist in finding employment; and finally, arrange marriages for them wherever possible.

These Rehabilitation Centres not only persevered in finding single women suitable grooms but also arranged for dowry for the weddings. The preoccupation with reaffirming that the primary location of women was the familial household further confirmed that a single woman's sexuality was considered to be a potential threat to the society and must be regulated through marriage. However, a positive outcome of the rehabilitation programme was that though widowhood was considered "ritually inauspicious, socially stigmatised, [and] traditionally shunned," these widows were given an opportunity by the state to be self-sufficient (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 149). Furthermore, the absence of family ensured that "ritual and customary sanctions against widows were temporarily suspended," thereby allowing the widows to have more autonomy over their lives (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 153). While the country was (and still is) seen as Mother India, the state took on the role of the father. The ingrained idea that a woman must always be under the tutelage of a man was reflected in the obsessive need of the state to be the paternalistic saviour figure for these unattached women.

So far, I have discussed the issue of violence against women committed by men of the rival religious group and the steps taken by the governments of India and Pakistan towards the recovery and rehabilitation of the victims. Now, I will address the second form of gendered violence, i.e. violence committed by women's own male kin. When one talks about violence against women, one must acknowledge that many women were killed by their own family members or coerced into committing suicide for the sake of protecting religious and familial honour. As Menon and Bhasin state (1998: 45):

Poisoned, strangled or burnt to death, put to the sword, drowned. It was made abundantly clear to [women] that death was preferable to “dishonour”, that in the absence of their men the only choice available to them was to take their own lives.

For a religious community that strongly associates its honour with the purity of its women, death is the obvious choice over rape, conversion, or abduction, because losing one’s religion would constitute a symbolic death, considered to be far worse than the reality of death itself. Furthermore, during communal riots where women’s bodies became the most potent and symbolic targets, suicides committed by women were seen as heroic acts of religious pride, requiring courage and valour. The women were considered *martyrs* who had sacrificed themselves to safeguard their families’ (and community’s) honour. A well-documented case of such an instance comes from the village of Thoa Khalsa, Rawalpandi⁵ where ninety Sikh women committed suicide by jumping into a well to prevent rape and abduction by Muslims. Narratives about these women come from men (usually family members who had survived), and there always seems to be an insistence that the suicides were necessary and were committed voluntarily (Butalia 1998: 210). These women are now remembered as heroes who perished to protect their religion’s purity from getting tarnished. Butalia claims that during her interviews with survivors of partition riots, she found that many women did actively engage in violence. However, she explains (1994: 138):

[F]or men, the potential for violence on the part of their women . . . has to be contained and circumscribed. They cannot be named as violent beings . . . This is why their actions are narrated as sanctified by the tones of heroic, even other-worldly, valour. Such narratives are meant to keep women within their *aukat* (their ordained boundary), which is one that defines them as non-violent.

Butalia’s statement on society’s refusal to see women as capable of any kind of agency proves that even in their aggression, women are seen as creatures passively succumbing to their fates as sanctioned by the religious community. I do not argue that these women had a better option (it was either self-immolation or rape and abduction). Nevertheless, it must be noted that consenting to your own death does not necessarily entail forthright willingness.

⁵Rawalpandi is now a part of Pakistan.

As I end this paper, I must address a statement made by Fredric Jameson in his essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” Jameson claims (1986: 69) that all Third World literatures are essentially similar, since they narrate “the story of the private individual destiny” that reflects “the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society.” This uninformed generalisation has come under strong criticism by several postcolonial scholars. One must understand that a sweeping generalisation about the Third World cannot be made as it undercuts the issues of class, ethnicity, and gender (among many other factors) that define the identity of a Third World individual. This paper, therefore, can be seen as a commentary on how during the time of ethnic genocide between two Third World countries (India and Pakistan), the actions and experiences of men were vastly different from that of women. Similarly, women’s experiences of the partition of India vary depending on various crucial factors other than just their womanhood. However, it can be asserted that within the ideological framework, women during the partition riots were seldom seen as subjects. These women were treated as objects through which a community’s idea of purity and pride was orchestrated by controlling their sexuality and bodies. Hence, the aspect of violence against women during partition not only highlights gender differences in the Indian Subcontinent but can also be seen as one of the primary examples that deconstructs Jameson’s notion that Third World experiences can all be categorised as one. In fact, even today, the lives of women in South Asia still continue to unfold in a manner very different to those of South Asian men.

In conclusion, it can be said that women’s link to nation not only lies in their biological role of birthing citizens of a country or a religious group, but women are also seen as signifiers of religious/cultural ideology and honour where their bodies operate as ethnic/national boundaries (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989: 1480). In the aftermath of partition, much like the Indian Subcontinent, gender itself was territorialised, meaning that “[w]omen’s bodies represented both the inner core of patriarchy — couched in the language of honor and prestige — as well as marking boundaries of social and national reproduction” (Abraham 2014: 42). The official history does not offer insight to the “myths about shame and honour, blood and belonging” (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 21). For that one must turn to women’s histories, which “interrogate not only the history we know, but how we know it” (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 21). Understanding the ideology behind violence against women (followed by the abducted women’s recovery and rehabilitation by the paternal state) allows for the revelation of multiple truths as opposed to a singular, official state-sanctioned truth. Moreover, this alternate history also sheds light on the physical and psychological trauma of gender-specific torture. Women’s histories, literature, and testimonies divulge exactly what official partition history chooses to ignore. These narratives reveal how women were ruthlessly

used as silent, dehumanised tools amidst the patriarchal power play between two religious groups.

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