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Independence, Partition and Gendered Violence

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Abstract: This paper seeks to analyse the causes of sectarian violence against women which are rooted in the history of the partition of the country during independence and patriarchal attitudes which continue to dominate society. That this violence was gendered is a fact largely ignored by recorded history although it appears as a recurrent theme in the fictional narratives of the partition. Recent woman-centric works by scholars like Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin and others have now provided a factual base for the fictional narratives which reveal the nexus behind patriarchal values and communal violence in which women become the nameless victims. Hence, the paper emphasizes the importance of these works in any assessment of sectarian violence against women. It also shows how the violence becomes gendered as a result of dominant patriarchal attitudes which have not changed significantly since independence.

Keywords: *Partition, Gender, Violence, Patriarchy, Independence*

The nationalist struggle for independence from colonial rule lasted for almost half a century and the course of this struggle revealed certain sectarian interests which came to the fore on the threshold of independence and ultimately resulted in the partition of the country into two nations. While independence from colonial rule was celebrated by both sides, sectarian interests in the form of two religious communities tore the country apart with the biggest ethnic genocide recorded in world history, a genocide which exceeded the horrors of the holocaust and in which the major victims on both sides were women. According to official statistics, about 12 million people migrated between India and

East and West Pakistan, about 200,000 to a million people died and 75,000 women were abducted, raped and subjected to unimaginable sexual savagery. The trauma of this violence is significantly absent in the official recorded history of the time. Women's experience is relegated to the realm of silence. While the State remembers its freedom fighters and celebrates its freedom from colonial domination, no space is allotted to the victims of partition. From research done by scholars like Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin and others, it appears that even families whose women were abducted are now reluctant to recall the facts. This appears to be a deliberate kind of forgetting, the erasing of a memory which not only reveals the State and its citizens to be powerless in the face of warring sectarian forces but also a continuing political use of sectarian differences. This fact alone makes it necessary to re-examine the violence of the time and its particular nature, for the attitudes which shaped the violence then, still exist within the society.

In one of the biggest ironies of social and political history, while both Indian and Pakistani Constitutions guarantee the protection of minority rights and secular freedom for all citizens, within the social fabric, narratives of prejudice and hate are kept alive and ignited from time to time to favour political interests and subjugate minority groups. Urvashi Butalia, in her book, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition* reminds us that sectarian/communal interests still surround us in our body polity.

Yet, all around us, there was a different reality: partitions everywhere, communal tension, religious fundamentalism, continuing divisions on the basis of religion. In Delhi, Sikhs became targets of communal attacks in 1984; in Bhagalpur in Bihar, hundreds of Muslims were killed in one of India's worst communal riots in 1989; a few years later, the Babri Mosque was destroyed by frenzied Hindu communalists... and later, thousands of Muslims were again targeted in Surat, Ahmedabad and Bombay. (4)

Butalia continues to state that individual lives to have been affected in such a way that inter-communal marriages cannot take place without public censure. Suspicion and distrust still haunt the two communities. Suppressed partition memories have become a part of the collective unconscious, which may emerge at any critical moment. It is, therefore,

necessary to examine the actual history of the partition as it occurred in the experience of the common mass and with particular regard to women who were the principal victims. As Lukacs says, History can be viewed as a mass experience which offers “concrete possibilities for a man to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in History something that affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them” (26). This experience has links with social transformation and people’s awareness of their relationship with the nation and the world.

In addition to re-visiting the history of partition from a woman-centric view, it is necessary to recognize the validity of partition literature as an adjunct to the official narratives because this illustrates the core experience of the affected masses more substantially. One must remember that both history and literature are mediated and reflect the point of view of the agencies which control them. Bipin Chandra and his associates have identified several historiographic perspectives ranging from the hardcore imperialist to the Marxist which informs the retelling of the freedom struggle in India. These include the liberal version of the imperialist school which denies the existence of colonialism as an economic, political, social, cultural structure in India and assumes that before 1947 India was not a nation, but an amalgam of several identities, largely associated with different structures based on religion, caste and class. They also assume that there was nothing like a national movement. This particular view was, in fact, used to justify the act of partition. In their view, nationalism was actually an instrument used by elite groups to mobilize the masses and to satisfy their own interests. The point that is being emphasised here is that the writing of history expresses different points of view depending on who writes it. One historian has divided the entire community of historians in India into three groups. The first consists of the imperialists, the Marxists and the sub-class of pseudo secularists and Muslim communalists. The second includes the nationalists and the Hindu communalists who romanticize the Hindu tradition. The third set is made of those who try to rise above the vitiating atmosphere and attempt to write objective history with the cruel awareness of the inevitable subjective element in it.

In the western paradigm of historiography, towards the close of the 19th century there had been a violent reaction against the subjective

writing of history and the concept of scientific historiography came into existence. A new emphasis on the importance of scientific facts led to the growth of positivist historiography and the ideal of historiographic literature became the monograph. The result was the simultaneous presence of two kinds of history, the serious and the popular. This was a cultural moment of great significance, the beginnings of the elite versus the popular culture which had serious implications for history and the arts, in the years to come. Positivist history came to be identified with the academy and was characterised by quantitative methods and analytic vigour. Along with this, however, there developed a fresh interest in history as a narrative where the historian as narrator selects facts in his recreation of the past and fashions them into a coherent and complete narrative in much the same way as a writer of fiction does. Because of this, we cannot think of a single, correct original description of anything and there can be many correct views, each requiring its own style of representation. Moreover, some disconcerting features have appeared in the way designated official history is being written – a great deal of power politics has intruded into the domain of history writing which has provoked writers to offer alternative documentation of reality as perceived by them.

In a recent study entitled, *Tyranny of Partition*, Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff shows how State supported ‘narratives, grand-narratives, rhetoric’ defined by her as ‘mental borders’ partition the land and people in it into religious ‘minorities’ and ‘majorities’ and ‘colonise’ the former by linking them to ‘partition’. They thus create and sustain ‘partitioned nation states and societies.’ (Kerkhoff, 2006: 37) Having said this, it is equally important to assert that within a democratic framework multiple points of view must be allowed to co-exist, especially in historical discourse as they represent different strands of our social fabric. But the historical discourse of partition must be supplemented with the discourse of the event in literature because while history gives us figures and facts, it leaves out the essential experience, particularly of marginalised sections of society such as women. It seeks to reinforce the overarching patriarchal viewpoint and thereby justifies the violence done to them. The works of feminist socio-historians like Urvashi Butalia, Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon must be taken into cognizance along with that vast body of fictional representations we call Partition Literature in order

to understand the reasons behind the violence. Manto's stories of the period are powerful representations of the suspension of all moral values and the sense of bewilderment that surrounded the people. Amrita Pritam in *The Skeleton* recreates the dilemma of abducted women who refused to return and provides a rationale for their choice which history does not give and which is discussed later in the paper. In Lalithambika Antharjanam's story entitled *A Leaf in the Storm*, we sense the rage of the woman who is abducted and raped and we also see her acknowledging a natural sympathy for the child she is nurturing in her womb even though it is the result of the violation of her body. When she decides to keep the child instead of aborting it, we are made aware of the sense of 'self' that develops in those who have survived horrific experiences. Other writers like Intizar Hussain in stories like *An Unwritten epic*, *City of Sorrow* and *A letter from India* reflect a complex and ambiguous response to the mindless violence of partition but there is hope in the retrieval of memories.

It must be remembered that Bengal too was partitioned and what was formerly East Bengal became East Pakistan. The earlier partition of 1905, done by the British colonial regime was also on communal lines and therefore the partition of 1947 seemed to vindicate the dominant narrative that the two communities could not co-exist. According to Debjani Sengupta, the literary response to the event in Bengal was different from that of the writers in Punjab. Partition is treated more as a metaphor of exile than a period of unimaginable violence. "Being a refugee meant a radically fragmented world and a self that was in perpetual exile." (Sengupta: *Mapmaking*: 188) Bengali literature on the partition from the late 1940s to late 60s and 70s show how the displaced people deal with dislocation. What concerns the writers more is the relationship between the two Bengals. The issues of language in East Pakistan in the late 1960s and early 1970s which eventually led to the formation of Bangla Desh engaged the interests of several writers and enjoined them to review the partition of 1947. Bengali writers, therefore, take a retrospective look at Partition exploring the relationship between nationalism, identity and memory. Narendranath Mitra (1916-75) in his short stories talks about the travails of Muslim peasantry and the beginnings of separatism in his works like *Palonko*, *Headmaster* and *Kathgolap*. Ateen Bandhopadhya and Sunil Gangopadhyay address the

issues arising from Partition in different ways. Overall, their retrospective vision offers an oblique look at partition instead of a direct one. However, gender issues do pervade the narratives as Manik Bandyopadhyay's short story *The Final Solution* shows. Ashish Nandy in the foreword to *Mapmaking*, a collection of short stories on Partition deplores the reluctance of Bengali writers to depict their experiences directly and attributes it to selective amnesia. He says,

Perhaps the principal reason for the desperate refusal to work through the memories of 1946-48 – as psychoanalysts describe the process – is that these memories do not genuinely fit our acquired concepts of nationalism, progress and the state. They demand a different approach to the dominant ideas of governance and statecraft, to mass violence and resistance to it at grassroots. (Nandy: *Mapmaking*, 2011 *Forward*)

Ritu Menon observes that Women's absence as subjects of history is due to the fact that they are presumed to be outside *the public and political where history is made*. (Menon: 2004:3) The only women who find mention in official history are those who were consciously brought into the political domain and became public figures. They belonged to the elite educated and privileged sections of society. Having done their bit to represent women in the nationalist movement, they went back into their family fold. Sarojini Naidu, for instance, hailed as a nationalist poet never wrote a single word after independence. The majority of the abducted women were uneducated and illiterate, their social identity derived from the families and communities to which they belonged, their 'self' subsumed under the patriarchal structures of family and religion. Arunima Dey in her paper entitled, "Violence Against Women During the Partition of India: Interpreting Women and their Bodies in the Context of Ethnic Genocide," says,

Since the two countries divided citizens based on who was a Hindu/Sikh and who was a Muslim, all other aspects of identity such as culture, language, local customs etc were shrouded by religious megalomania. (105)

Women became the worst victims of the ensuing sectarian violence. Regarded as the property of their enemy community, women were targeted for humiliation by the 'other'. Their bodies were mutilated – breasts amputated, wombs torn out, genitals branded with religious

symbols; many women were stripped and paraded naked in religious places before being raped and sold. As Menon and Bhasin put it, these acts of violence served as metaphors or “indicator[s] 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 & Bhasin: 1998: 41). Women’s bodies served as messages of hate from one rival group to another. A branded woman would be a constant reminder of humiliation to the community she belonged to. According to Menon and Bhasin, mutilation of women’s bodies and sexual organs *desexualise a woman and negate her as wife and mother*. Her primary role as a nurturer is thus destroyed and her existence rendered meaningless. In patriarchy, a woman's significance lies in her sexuality and ability to perpetuate the community, in fact in her biological role in reproduction. Motherhood is therefore valorised and even the nation is conceived of as a Mother. A right-wing journal called ‘Organiser’ active during the time of partition, depicted the map of India as a mother figure clad in a red saree with one of her limbs severed to depict the partitioned areas. Nehru is shown as the perpetrator of this act. Partition thus is seen as a violation of the female body. As Deniz Kandiyoti quoted by Arunima Dey says,

“[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 signifier of national difference.” (107)

Women thus function as ideological markers of national and religious pride but their actual social role is reduced to the relevance of their reproductive function which is regulated by patriarchal authority. Within this ideological framework, women have little autonomy over their bodies and reproductive organs. In the gender binary of male/female women occupy the less privileged position and metaphorically speaking, in times of sectarian violence, the nation conceived of as the mother becomes the un-empowered hapless entity requiring the protection of the male citizens. The partition thus is seen as the inability of the male to protect his own. So many women were reported missing during partition that the Government was forced to recognize the fact and take action.

The Government of India and Pakistan established the Inter – Dominion Agreement in November 1947 for the recovery of abducted

women from both sides of the Radcliffe line. By December 1949, about 12,500 Muslim women were recovered from India and approximately 6,200 Hindu and Sikh women from Pakistan. (Menon & Bhasin 1998:69-70) This exercise was conducted to return the abducted women to their families which in many cases refused to accept them in their 'defiled' or 'impure' state. Urvashi Butalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* explains the reluctance of families to accept their women.

Each woman who had been taken away was actually, or potentially, a mother. Within the givens of motherhood, her sexuality could be contained, accepted and legitimized. But as a raped or abducted mother, and further as an abducted mother who actually expressed a desire to stay on with her abductor, this sexuality was no longer comprehensible, or acceptable. (190)

The women had to be brought back, 'purified' the implication being that they had to be separated from their illegitimate offspring, whether they wished to or not and relocated within the community. The moral order could be restored only then, and only then as the *Organiser* repeatedly pointed out, *would the emasculated, weakened manhood of the Hindu male be vindicated. If Partition was a loss of itself to the 'other', a metaphorical violation and rape of the body of the motherland, the recovery of women was its opposite, the regaining of the 'pure' (and this purity had to be constantly re-emphasised) body of the woman, essential, indeed crucial for the State's – and community's self-legitimation.* (Butalia 1998: 189)

The Recovery Bill itself is a testimony of the patriarchal stance of the two Nation States. It proclaimed 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 particular clause stated,

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 abducted and recovered women had no choice or say in the way they wished to live out the rest of their lives. They were not treated as

citizens with rights, but as chattel to be returned to their respective owners or if rejected perfunctorily put into hastily improvised State-run homes. Although abortion was illegal at the time, many women were persuaded to undergo the procedure. Women with children born of their abductors were persuaded to abandon their children as they would be unacceptable to their families. Many women refused to return to their families because of the perceived stigma attached to them. Urvashi Butalia in her essay, "Questions of Sexuality and Citizenship during Partition" (1997) claims that after recovery there were 75,000 unattached women, implying those women who did not have any male guardians. These were put into Rehabilitation Centres where the State provided some sort of vocational training and elementary education. The State also arranged marriages with a dowry for single women of marriageable age. In fact, the State assumed a paternalistic role.

There was another kind of violence on women during the partition, that perpetrated by male patriarchs on women of their own families. Urvashi Butalia in the book, *Other Side of Silence...* narrates an eyewitness account by Bir Bahadur Singh of village Thoa Khalsa, Rawalpindi, who saw his father cut down his daughter with his kirpan while she knelt before him meekly submitting. One pregnant woman in his family was given opium while others were persuaded to jump into a well and drown themselves. So deeply ingrained is the association of honour with women's bodies in patriarchal societies and communities that these acts are regarded as acts of martyrdom and commemorated as such. The justification lies in the notion that these women died of their own free will in order to save the honour of their family, religion and community. They preferred death to be taken by the enemy. In the ritualistic retelling of such stories, the male agency of violence is absolved of all responsibility and guilt. Patriarchal conditioning of women is ignored. Surviving men build other families with other women in another time and place, perpetuating the patriarchal structures of family, community and nation.

The Partition demonstrates like no other event in history does, how patriarchal structures of family, community and even the State fail in their principal mission of protecting their own. It shows that patriarchy reduces women to a state of dependence and leaves them un-empowered. It reveals that the deification of women in their roles as a mother is an

illusory construct meant to deflect attention from the actual disempowered status of women within a patriarchal ideology. In essence, women are the marginalised section of society while all power, authority and agency are vested in the male. In times of sectarian violence, women become victims of violence, their sexuality is abused, their 'self' denied any identity or agency. Arunima Dey states,

that 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 honour and prestige – as well as marking boundaries of social and national reproduction.” (Abraham 2014:42 qtd in Arunima Dey)

The official histories do not shed light on the “myths about shame and honour, blood and belonging.” (Menon and Bhasin 1998:21) Hence one must not undermine or dismiss the importance of alternate history in the form of literature and socio-feminist discourses mentioned in this paper. These give us multiple perspectives on the event instead of one single officially sanctioned narrative. Indeed, if nothing else, the partition history cautions us about accepting the ideological positions attributed to gender within patriarchal narratives. It also reminds us that since the partition of India was executed on sectarian lines, the presence of both sects within the body polity of the two nation-states as the majority and minority population undermines the professed secular nature of the respective constitutions and keeps alive the possibility of conflict and violence. Ibrahim Jaleez in the story *A Grave turned Inside – out* relates the story of Ayesha who is a Bihari and has followed her husband to Dhaka having been listed as a Pakistani in the Census Bureau. After having stayed there for twenty-four years she is suddenly reminded of her Bihari origins and in the ensuing language riots, she loses her husband and daughter who is abducted by the Qazi. She follows her husband's friend to Kathmandu and then West Pakistan in search of her daughter, only to discover that there the only space she can occupy is the graveyard. However, this space too becomes a grave when Nurul is accused of grabbing Government land and Ayesha is raped until she dies. Ayesha migrates from Bihar to East Pakistan and then to West Pakistan but everywhere she is undesirable. Her religious identity does not make her a citizen or grant her immunity from sexual predators. In fact, it

leaves her vulnerable to exploitation by everyone including her religious mentors and protectors.

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