

IMPACT OF THE PARTITION ON INDIAN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Partition is only as an important and crucial moment in history. It is coupled with the birth of a nation and is also a permanent marker of ‘self’ and ‘other’ on a gigantic material and national scale. The Indian Partition has raised many issues and questions about citizenship, national identity and the making of national and sub national mentalities. This paper focuses on the impact of partition on Indian women such as violence against women during the communal riots that followed the Partition of India in 1947.

Keywords: Indian Partition, ethnic violence, violence against women,

The Partition has been the biggest blunder in the history of mankind. According to Altaf Hussein, “The Indian freedom struggle resulted in the creation of two new nations with the departure of the British in August 1947”. In August 1947, the British left India, and the subcontinent was partitioned into two independent nations: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. As a result, a million people were left dead, at least seventy five thousand women were raped, mutilated and abandoned, about twelve million people were displaced and rendered homeless, countless homes, properties, families were devastated as new national borders were drawn, ruthlessly wiping away the old existing cultural, ethnic and geographical entities.

This research has attempted to study this and set it in the larger picture of the two disciplines –history and literature.

Novels on the partition try to depict the socio-cultural ethos of a community in detail within a historically specific temporal framework. It is then logical that the form of novel and short story, which is also narrative, be studied to make the juxtaposition and comparison more relevant and plausible. In the present study the partition of 1947 has been considered.

The main theme of this paper focus on violence against women during the partition of India was an extensive issue. It is estimated that during the partition between 75,000–and 100,000–women were kidnapped and raped. The rape of women by males during this period is well documented–with women also being complicit in this attack. In this issue systematic violence against women started in March 1947 in Rawalpindi district where Sikh women were targeted by Muslim mobs. Violence was also perpetrated on an organized basis, with Pathans taking Hindu and Sikh women from refugee trains while one observer witnessed armed Sikhs periodically dragging Muslim women:

So at that time of partition women were subjected to various kinds of violence by different agents during the partition. Thousands of women, estimates range from 25,000 to 29,000 were abducted, raped, forced into marriage, forced to convert and killed, on both sides of the border. Women were also mutilated, their breasts cut off, stripped naked and paraded down the streets and their bodies carved with religious symbols of the ‘other’ community. GD Khosla gave example of a young girl whose relations were made to stand in a circle and watch while she was raped by several men.

Many women inflicted on women by their own men in the form of suicides they were coerced into, or killed in the name of honour. There were also women who committed suicide of their own volition to keep their ‘purity’ and were later glorified as ‘martyrs’. Through the interview of one of the three survivors (Basant Kaur) of the Thoa Khalsa incident, Urvashi Butalia deconstructs the conventional view of women being always perceived as victims in an ethnic conflict. She argues that while some women were forced and compelled to die, if the accounts of the survivors are to be believed, there

were some who voluntarily took this decision. Many families had reported their family members especially their women as missing or abducted.

In this subject Butalia argues that unlike the popular belief that the aggressors and abductors were always ‘outsiders’ there were many examples where women, of all ages were abducted by men from their own village. She claims that the social workers contended this by arguing that the women were abducted for various reasons, for instance, older women for their property. Thus, unlike in the dominant narrative of women’s experiences of partition, they were violated for many reasons and by their own men as well. There were also other reasons why women were reluctant to go back to their families or communities.

Butalia cites one incident from Kirpal Singh’s book *The Partition of the Punjab*, in which the policemen themselves raped a woman they had gone to recover. Regarding the children borne by abducted women, as Veena Das maintains, the state refused to recognise them as legitimate since they were born of ‘wrong’ sexual unions.

Primary sources of our 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. 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 (35). While Butalia writes in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (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.

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 (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 occupied in an all-male, patriarchal arrangement of gender relations, between and within religious or ethnic communities” (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* explain the relevance of the female body in communal conflict. She states (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.”

According to Menon 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 Moreover, the vagueness of the bill nullified many inter-religious marriages that were indeed genuine, which ironically led to the breaking up of happy 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?"(144). Kidwai suggests the possibility that the alleged abductor could indeed have rescued the woman from falling prey to other men⁽¹⁰⁻¹³⁾.

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.

As Menon and Bhasin state (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 being 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.

In this way impact of partition on Indian women is such a big issue where women were exploited in so many reasons such as rape, violence...etc. The issue of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent which was selected for study was, is and will always be an issue of national importance. This year marks the 74th anniversary of the partition of India, an event that triggered one of bloodiest upheavals in human history. 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. 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

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