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Gendering Migration and Violence: Women and the Partition of India

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RESUMEN:

La partición de la India, acaecida en 1947, fue testigo de la migración de más de doce millones de personas y engendró una violencia que dejó más de un millón de muertos, más de 50,000 mujeres fueron "secuestradas" y las que se encontraron en el lado equivocado de la frontera se convirtieron en refugiadas de la noche a la mañana. El presente ensayo pretende arrojar luz sobre diversos temas relacionados con la partición de la India, tales como la nostalgia y el desarraigo, la pérdida de la patria, la noción de hogar, el poder de la religión y la violencia que siguió al conflicto. Dentro de este contexto de éxodo y disturbios religiosos, esta contribución se centra en la violencia ejercida sobre las mujeres, quienes fueron víctimas de violaciones, mutilaciones genitales, secuestros y asesinatos por honor. Haciendo uso de estudios previos de corte histórico y sociológico (Butalia, 1998; Menon y Bhasin, 2011), el trabajo explora la noción de nación como "madre" y desentraña las diversas formas en las que el cuerpo de la mujer, conceptualizado metafóricamente como estado-nación, fue empleado por unos y otros durante este periodo de conflicto.

Palabras clave: India, partición, violencia de género, feminismo, patriarcado

ABSTRACT:

The partition of India, 1947, witnessed the migration of over twelve million people and communal violence which left over a million dead, more than 50,000 women were "abducted" and those who found themselves on the wrong side of the border effectively became refugees overnight bereft of their land and belongings and most importantly, what they referred to as their home. This paper attempts to shed light upon varied themes related to the partition such as nostalgia and uprootedness, the loss of motherland, the notion of home, the power of religion and the communal violence that ensued. Amidst the exodus and the religious riots, I focus on gendered violence, where women became victims of rape, genital mutilation, abductions and honour killings. Drawing on historical and sociological studies (Butalia, 1998; Menon y Bhasin, 2011), this contribution will explore notions of the nation as "mother" and the act of mythologizing women as the nation-state, thereby negating their identity as individuals. Historically speaking, during communal riots, the bodies of women have often become the site of battle, where communal rivalries are enacted out – women are raped and abducted by men of the Other religion. The woman's body is not just the locus of national identity, but the body itself is interpreted as constantly reaffirming the boundaries of the nation and religious community.

Keywords: India, partition, gender violence, feminism, patriarchy

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 to the Indians. The trauma of 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. Urvashi Butalia states that the refugees' "experience of dislocation and trauma [that] shaped their lives . . . find[s] little reflection in written history" (1998: 9). Partha Chatterjee in his book *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993) comments on the idea of ideological nation-building, and reflects on the importance given by citizens on defining their newly independent nation to attest their own self-worth as nationals of the country. Chatterjee explains that, for a colonised country like India, it becomes even more pertinent to assert its distinct, anti-colonial identity:

by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains – the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the "outside", of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an "inner" domain bearing the "essential" marks of

cultural identity. The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctiveness of one's spiritual culture. (1993: 6)

Chatterjee claims that colonised India tried to define its national identity based on cultural terms. Moreover, Chatterjee further asserts that the identity construction of a colonised country also deliberately focuses on highlighting their values, which are seen in opposition to those of the coloniser:

In fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a 'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not Western. If the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being. (Chatterjee, 1993: 6)

Chatterjee's comment on the nation as "an imagined community" attains a twofold meaning after the partition of India because both India and Pakistan now must create a national identity, which is not just in opposition to and different from their British rulers but also from each other. When it came to cultural identity, during the period of colonisation, Indians refused to compromise their loyalty to their own culture, religious beliefs and languages. However, the aftermath of partition created millions of displaced persons whose understanding of their cultural identity could no longer be anchored to the land they identified as home. Pakistan and India now had to forge new identities of their own; Pakistan became an Islamic state, while India became a democratic republic. Nonetheless, the refugees found themselves lost; their new country was a place to which they had no ties with, they now belonged nowhere and were seen as an unavoidable hindrance to the state.

The analysis done by Chatterjee is one among many views that attempt to explain this watershed moment in South Asian history. My paper, however, focuses on the "Women Question" during partition. As a woman and as someone whose family history is closely linked to the partition, I have been drawn to the topic of gendered violence during this period of ethnic genocide. Chatterjee in "Colonialism,

Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India" notes:

The nationalist discourse we have heard so far is a discourse about women; women do not speak here. It is a discourse which assigns to women a place, a sign, an objectified value; women here are not subjects with a will and a consciousness. We now have to ask very different questions to allow women in recent Indian history to speak for themselves. (1989: 632)

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 "objects of study, rather than as subjects" (Menon and Bhasin, 2011: 11). Hence, it is crucial to engage in a gendered reading of the partition. Butalia writes that during partition, 12 million people migrated, and death counts vary between 200,000 to two million, though it is commonly agreed upon that over a million lost their lives during the exodus (1998: 76, 3). The figures for the number of women abducted on both sides of the border stand at around 80,000 (Menon and Bhasin, 2011: 70; Butalia, 1998: 3). When we discuss violence against women during partition riots, it is pertinent to note that women not only fell prey to men of the other religious community but were also murdered by their own family. The most commonly used forms of violence on a woman's body were mutilation and branding of genitalia with religious symbols, ripping out of the womb, being paraded naked on the streets or place of religious worship and finally, rape. Every violent act serves as a metaphor that is "an indicator of the place that women's sexuality occupies in an all-male, patriarchal arrangement of gender relations, between and within religious or ethnic communities" (Menon and Bhasin, 2011: 41). The violent acts on women's bodies were not targeted at them as individuals; their mutilated, battered, raped bodies were a way to send out a message to the men of the religious group to which the women belonged. The bodies of women became a site where one group tried to prove its religious supremacy over the other.

To elaborate on the symbolic meanings behind various violent acts, one could

begin by noting that branding a woman's body with symbols of the other country or religious group suggests that the woman has been tainted by the sinful religious Other. Her shame remains forever ingrained on her body. Parading of naked women at a place of worship is a double-edged attack; it is the humiliation of one's religion and of women, who are meant to safeguard the purity of that religion. Amputating breasts, burning the vagina and ripping out of wombs serve an even more sinister purpose. For Menon and Bhasin, this form of violence "desexualises a woman and negates her as wife and mother; no longer a nurturer" (2011: 44). In a culture that continues to see women as only befitting to be mothers and caretakers of their husbands' households, amputating their sexual organs essentially makes their very existence inconsequential.

Extending the notion that a woman's primary role is considered to be that of a 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" 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" (1991: 1490). 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 which 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. As motherhood becomes a matter of nationalist agenda, women are denied autonomous control over their bodies and reproductive organs. The oppression of women and the insistence of patriarchal society to control and modulate their bodies are played out in its extremities in times of conflict and ethnic violence, when both communities treat women's bodies as national boundaries that need to be protected from the predator or sabotaged to humiliate the other religious/ethnic group.

If a nation is considered a mother, it automatically becomes the feminine within the male/female dichotomy. This gendering of the nation legitimises the idea that the 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 a woman with her right limb severed lay, symbolising the newly carved out Pakistan from the body of Mother India while Jawaharlal

Nehru² loomed over the woman with a bloody knife in his hand (Butalia, 1998: 189). A similar political illustration can be found in Sukeishi Kamra's *Bearing Witness: Partition, Independence, and the End of the Raj* (2002) in which a woman is inside a magician's box, labelled Pakistan on one side and Hindustan on the other, and she is being sawed into half by Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah³ (Kamra, 2002: 77). 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, by 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" claims that violence against women was a way for 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. (2015: 46)

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). Henceforth, a woman's body needed to be protected from penetration by the religious Other because that *soiled* the woman.

As we explore the issue of violence against women during partition, we must acknowledge that many women were killed by their family members and coerced into committing suicide. Menon and Bhasin state:

Poisoned, strangled or burnt to death, put to the sword, drowned. It was made abundantly clear to them 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. (2011: 45)

The idea here is that, for a religious community that strongly associates its national and religious honour to the purity of their women, death is the obvious choice over rape, conversion or abduction as losing one's religion is symbolic death, which is considered much worse. Furthermore, during communal riots, where women's bodies became symbolic targets, suicides were seen as heroic acts of religious pride, 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 instances comes from the village of Thoa Khosla, Rawalpindi⁴ where ninety women committed suicide by jumping into a well to escape rape and abduction. The 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). I do not argue that the women had a better option; it was either death or rape and abduction. However, one must note that consent to die does not necessarily entail forthright willingness.

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. 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 menfolk. Stephen Morton in his essay "Violence, Gender and Partition in the Narration of the South Asian Nation" 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" (2012: 48). As previously mentioned, a woman's primary role was considered to be that of

a mother and it was through motherhood that her sexuality was validated and controlled. Hence, when a woman was raped or abducted:

[T]his sexuality was no longer comprehensible, or acceptable. 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. (Butalia, 1998: 190)

For Indians, especially, 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 to be taken away too. Therefore, this recovery act was seen as a way to reclaim, what appeared to be, their "emasculated, weakened manhood" (Butalia, 1998: 190). Land lost to Pakistan could not be recovered; therefore, 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). A woman is vulnerable and dangerous at the same time; vulnerable because she needs protecting and dangerous because loss of her purity would in effect mean contamination of her community.

What complicated matters even further was the fact that many of these women had been impregnated or had borne children to their abductors by the time they were rescued. When recovered, in order to be accepted back into their families, the women had to abandon these (what one may call) mixed blood children. Especially for Hindus, who functioned strictly on purity and segregation codes, it was unimaginable for them to accept a woman with a Muslim man's child, who would be a constant reminder of her and their religion's shame and dishonour. Opinions were divided regarding who should keep the children; many 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 a property of the man, despite the fact that the father was, in all likelihood, the abductor and rapist of the mother. Many expecting mothers underwent (illegal) abortions, since this was not just a case of pregnancy out of wedlock demonstrating a mockery of sexual code of conduct expected from chaste women but something more resentfully sinful; it was the proof of defilement by the religious Other polluting one's community and nation. The Parliament 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; the vagueness of the bill nullified many inter-religion marriages that were indeed genuine, which ironically led to breaking up of families. Jisha Menon explains:

[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)

Many women refused to be recovered and insisted on staying with their abductors. A primary reason behind their decision was the awareness that their now altered social status would entail their unacceptability and ostracism from the community on their return. The very fact that a woman would rather choose to live with her rapist reflects strongly upon how powerfully the patriarchal state stresses on regulating women's sexuality and the extreme measures it takes to moderate it. Many women who resisted recovery were forcefully taken away by the state and were installed where they ought to be, i.e., with male kin of their own religion. The 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'" (Mookerjee-Leonard, 2015: 13). They were simply whisked away catering to the demands of the religious community and patriarchal state.

The recovery programme was followed by the rehabilitation programme. Butalia in her essay "Questions of Sexuality and Citizenship during Partition" claims that post recovery there were 75,000 unattached women (1997: 97). Unattached by state's definition meant any woman who didn't have menfolk to provide for and protect her. The preoccupation with reaffirming the location of women back into the familial mould further confirms that a single woman and her sexuality remains a potential threat to the society. A positive outcome 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, and in the absence of family, "ritual and customary sanctions against widows were temporarily suspended" (Menon and Bhasin, 2011: 149, 153). While the country is seen as Mother India, the state takes on the role of the father. The ingrained idea that a woman must always be under the tutelage of a man is reflected in the obsessive need of the state to be the paternalistic saviour figure for these unattached women.

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 also as signifiers of cultural and religious ideology and honour where their bodies operate as ethnic/national boundaries (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 2000: 1480). Women during the partition of India were seldom seen as subjects; they were objects through which a community's idea of purity and pride was orchestrated through their sexuality and bodies. In the aftermath of partition, much like the Indian Subcontinent, gender itself was territorialized where "[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 us an insight into "myths about shame and honour, blood and belonging" for that we must turn to women's histories as they allow us to "interrogate not only the history we know, but how we know it" (Menon and Bhasin, 2011: 21). Understanding the reasons behind violence against women; rape, abduction, honour killings and suicides, followed by their recovery and

rehabilitation by the paternal state, not only presents us with multiple truths as opposed to one official state-sanctioned truth, but it also throws light on the physical and psychological trauma of gender specific torture. Women's histories tell us exactly what official partition history chooses to ignore; it reveals how women were ruthlessly used as mute, dehumanized tools amidst the patriarchal power play between two religious groups.

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NOTES

¹ Chughtai uses the term Hindustan for India.

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

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

⁴ Rawalpindi is now a part of Pakistan.

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