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## Exploration of the Theme of Gendered Violence during the Partition of India

**Yashika Kant**

B.A. (HONS) English  
Undergraduate Scholar  
St Stephen's College,  
Delhi University,  
Delhi.

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### **Abstract:**

The aim of the paper is to explore the gendered violence which occurred during partition and the ways and forms in which that gendered violence permeates. The paper deals with specific subtopics such as 'gendered telling of narratives', 'women as victims of family, community and nation', 'the difference in the infliction of violence on the male and female body' and finally 'the difference in the predicament of male and female child post partition'. The paper attempts to highlight the terrible stunning violence and the silencing pall that has descended like a shroud and only recently has the breaking of silence exposed not only the cracks in family mythologies about honour and sacrifice but the implicit consensus that prevails around permissible violence against women during periods of communal conflict. Through the inclusion of works by Bhutalia, Sidwa, and Manto, the paper aims to highlight the trauma which women faced during partition and the gendered aspect of it.

**Keywords:** narrative, female body, violence, community, state, trauma

The political partition of India in 1947 witnessed one of the greatest upheavals in human history. The scale of the human suffering has often been obscured, for neither the departing colonial power nor the two newly-independent nations have ever brought to highlight the massacres and misery in which all were complicit. "*The Other Side of Silence* has emerged from India's small but influential feminist movement, informed by a desire not only to democratize the history of partition but also to give a voice to those most often consigned to silence, the women of the sub-continent" (Whitehead 309). The book has been prompted by what, particularly to many Punjabis with their keen memories of 1947, appeared to be a coda to the partition violence - the massacre of 2,000 or more Delhi Sikhs in 1984, in the aftermath of the assassination of Indira Gandhi, India's Prime Minister, by her Sikh bodyguards. "It took 1984 to make me understand how ever-present Partition was in our lives too", asserts Urvashi Butalia, "to recognize that it could not be so easily put away inside the covers of history books" (13). What gives enormous power to Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* is the way she uses a very personal story to introduce the agony of the partition to her readers. The family tragedy has been her way into the study of partition, and to some understanding of the complexity of the violence, its layers of meaning, and the different ways it has touched groups and communities. Bhutalia writes, "This collection of memories, individual and collective, familial and historical, are what make up the

reality of Partition. They illuminate what one might call the ‘underside’ of its history” (10). One can question the genuineness of Bhutalia’s work by arguing that there’s no way of knowing if the stories people choose to tell are ‘true’ or not, nor of knowing what they choose to suppress. One can even view them as simply rehearsed performances. But to contest such doubts one can turn to the argument by James Young, who says, “Whatever “fictions” emerge from the survivors’ accounts are not deviations from the “truth” but are part of the truth in any particular version. The fictiveness in testimony does not involve disputes about facts, but the inevitable variance in perceiving and representing these facts, witness by witness, language by language, culture by culture.”

Bhutalia writes, “When I re-read the interviews now, it strikes me that there are some very clear differences in the speech of men and of women. Is there such a thing, then, as a gendered telling of Partition? The fact that most interviews took place in family situations also meant that women were seldom alone when they spoke to us. Much of the time the interview had to be conducted in the nooks and crannies of time that were available to women in between household tasks. Equally, if their husbands or sons were around, they tended to take over the interview, inadvertently or otherwise, making women lapse into a sort of silence. This is not uncommon—many oral historians have written about the difficulty of speaking to and with women, of learning to listen differently, often of listening to the hidden nuance, the half-said thing, the silences which are sometimes more eloquent than speech. Listening to women is, I think, a different thing between women than it is between men and women. From the women I learnt about the minutiae of their lives, while for the most part men spoke of the relations between communities, the broad political realities. Seldom was there an occasion when a man being interviewed would speak of a child lost or killed, while for a woman there was no way in which she could omit such a reference” (15-16).

The novel consistently reflects upon the power of storytelling in the formation of Sikh subjectivity. Assimilating diverse and sometimes competing “stories” narrated by different characters, it cues the reader early on that in fact, “stories are not told for the telling, but for the teaching,” drawing attention to its own pedagogical intent (Baldwin 146). Within the novel, men dominate the domain of storytelling, and even when women tell the stories; it is often men who control the narrative. Bhutalia writes, “Many people had urged me to talk to Mangal Singh, and I was curious about him. His legendary status in his neighbourhood came from the fact that, at Partition, he and his two brothers were said to have killed the women and children of their family, seventeen of them, before setting off across the border. Mangal Singh refused to accept the seventeen women and children had been killed. Instead, he used the word ‘martyred’” (194). “The novel illustrates effectively how the representational apparatus of Sikh communal culture produces a “martyrological consciousness” integral to the processes of Sikh (and particularly Sikh male) subjectification in a moment of violent political transition. The master narrative of such events within the family or community is constituted by men’s stories, which are typically “told in the heroic mode” and emphasize the valor of the dead woman through a strict disavowal

of fear and pain (55). Women's narrations, on the other hand, gender the realities of their lived experience differently—even though they might appear to broadly resemble the dominant narration of the men, they depart at significant points to challenge male narrations, if only implicitly” (Baldwin). Bhutalia writes, “But why kill the women and children? Did they not deserve a chance to live? Mangal Singh insisted that the women and children had ‘offered’ themselves up for death because death was preferable to what would almost certainly have happened: conversion and rape” (195).

One incident to which Urvashi Butalia devotes much attention is the mass deaths of Sikh women in March 1947 in the small town of Thoa Khalsa near Rawalpindi, in what is now Pakistan. More than twenty were killed by the elders of the extended family rather than risk dishonour at the hands of Muslim attackers, and then the next day eighty or more Sikh women and children took their own lives by jumping into a well, again to avoid the risk of abduction by Muslims. These deaths have become part of the folklore of the Sikh community in Delhi, where many refugees from this area have settled. Urvashi Butalia explores the notion of honour, the way in which the death of these women has been celebrated as martyrdom for the community and religion, and the extent to which the women were deprived of any individual agency in that most irrevocable of decisions, the taking of their lives. “It is a rich seam to explore, and touches on the extent to which communities have come to terms with partition by concealment - in the instance of the Thoa Khalsa survivors, by denying that any Sikh women from the town were abducted, and refusing to acknowledge that there was any aggression by Sikhs against Muslims” (Whitehead). “In order to speak for the ‘Other’, the ‘Other’ has to be silenced. This is where voicelessness constitutes a source of trauma as the ‘Other’ is excluded from the patriarchal processes that have constituted the production of knowledge and became arbitrators of the truth” (Abbott-Wallace). To be excluded from the telling of the truth of one's life and experience, to instead have it told from an ‘outside’ perspective, is wounding to the psyche which, according to Julia Kristeva, “represents the bond between the speaking being and the other, a bond that endows it with moral and therapeutic value.” “If patriarchal violence and the construction of the ‘Other’ are part of a dialectic that creates and appropriates a specific, non-inclusive truth, then the telling of all other truths becomes close to impossible. Women are wounded by this exclusion that seeks to speak for them, as they forego the process of articulated and acknowledged self-definition and self-discovery. Voicelessness as a symptom of traumatic wounding originates from the enforcing actions of othering, namely the experience of violence. To live through one or multiple encounters with violence is to face what Lewis Herman describes as the unspeakable. What complicates the expression of the wounding of violence is not merely that the psychological pain renders one wordless, or that there is no common language to describe what has happened, but also that the Other's exclusion from structures of meaning-making has literally resulted in being without a language that can tell of these things. While the ‘Other’ exists outside of language, in the sense of being located within the definitions of overarching the power structures, there is no language that readily gives voice to oppression, as in terms of the dominant ideology it does not exist. The language that describes the world is not the language of women's making – hence the

finding of a voice to relay experiences that officially do not exist has been a historically ongoing struggle for the 'Other'" (Allport 42). "If the wounding of trauma is derived from the structures that define and create boundaries of meaning-making, then women have no access to tell the stories of their experiences in that language: When the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child)[non-white], she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality. Her experience becomes unspeakable" (Herman).

"In *Cracking India*, Sidhwa stresses the materiality of how male, as well as female bodies, become different kinds of sites for violent sexual, economic, and communal transactions during decolonization - some that have little to do with nationalism. For example, her novel's representation of the abduction and rape of Ayah (the narrator's Hindu maid) by her lover complicates and contests anthropological explanations of Partition's sexual violence as being about patriarchal communal honor" (Daiyah). *Cracking India* is about the experience of Partition from the perspective of a Parsi family in Lahore. An eight-year-old Parsi girl, Lenny Sethi, from an upper-middle-class household, narrates her family's experience as Partition becomes an imminent political reality in 1947. The characters that surround Lenny include Slavesister, Electric Aunt, Old Husband, Godmother, Ayah, and Ice-Candy-Man. Ice-Candy-Man is a Muslim street vendor drawn, like many other men, by the magnetic beauty of Ayah, Lenny's nanny. As Partition draws nearer and the violence escalates in Lahore, there comes a day when a mob of Muslim men roaming the city to attack Hindus arrives at the doorstep of the Sethi's bungalow (thinking they are Hindu, as Sethi tends to be a Hindu last name). "In the exchange that follows, we witness how particular practices of encoding the identity of "co-religionists" and others rearticulate a cosmopolitan community of friendships into abstract, polarized relations of ethnic difference" (Daiyah). All the members of the household (except Ayah, who is Hindu) gather before the mob to confront it, and Lenny notes that the men in the mob look like "calculating men, whose ideals and passions have cooled to ice" (190). The mob demands that the Hindus in the household come forth; the Muslim cook Imam Din tells them that there are none in the house. Then, someone from the back of the mob asks for Hari, the Hindu gardener, and Imam Din genially informs the mob: "Hari-the-gardener has become Himat Ali." Hari has obviously converted to escape the violence, as was common; his conversion to Islam is here signified by his taking on an Islamic name. But this name change does not convince the mob of his true conversion: "'Let's make sure,' a man says, hitching up his lungi, his swaggering gait bent on mischief. 'Undo your shalwar Himat Ali. Let's see if you're a proper Muslim'" (192). Because Hari/Himat Ali has recently been circumcised and is able to also recite the Muslim prayer Kalman on demand, the mob spares his life. "The circumcised or uncircumcised penis in this moment of the anxiety of identification and ethnic conflict becomes an exaggerated, material sign of "religious" identity upon the other's male body; further, the propriety of religious identity is marked "male." The public visibility of the penis becomes a mode of ascertaining true Hindu/Muslim identity, which is at the same time always already a masculine identity in this discourse. The visual marking of his sexual body in ritualized ways and the performance of the Kalman are thus signifiers of a masculine Muslim identity that is less religious and more ethnic

for Hari/Himat Ali. This transaction dramatizes not only the somatic intimacy of ethnic identity but also its very production. This production of new intimate identities occurs not through the conversion of faith and belief that have to do with the transformation of the modern subject's interiority. Instead, it materializes through "proper" bodily mutilation and the accurate performance of religious practice in everyday life. Hari's conversion probably constitutes the humiliating, symbolic emasculation of Hindu men for the mob, as well as legitimizes his presence in the new nation-state Pakistan created for Muslims" (Daiya 225-26).

This is the scene of violence that becomes ordinary during Partition and refashions everyday life. Accounts of Partition are replete with incidents of castration and both voluntary and forced conversion of men, women, and children. "To address the anxiety of the masculine other's "proper" religious identity (as the man in the mob reveals), forcing men (before killing or converting them) to strip in order to examine whether they were circumcised or uncircumcised was seen to be the ultimate, foolproof test of whether they were Muslim or Hindu/Sikh. Circumcision, the shaving of facial and head hair (for Sikh men), and the shaving off of the Hindu Brahmin's traditional, short, plaited hair on an otherwise bald head were routine Muslim conversion tactics for men and boys. In the discourse that produces the test of a "proper Muslim," this incident reveals that women never inhabit that identity of a proper religious subject. Women's bodies are not marked in ritual ways for women are never "properly" ethnically identified except through their relations with men (Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh). Hence, the signs of women's ethnic difference appear at the sartorial level (through dress, makeup, jewelry), already one level removed from the somatic marking of male bodies. Of course, during Partition, many women who were abducted and raped by men from the "enemy" community were branded with religious symbols on their bodies. These symbols ("Om" or the crescent moon) did not signify the women's conversion; they represented their otherness (or their other identity as Hindu, Sikh, or Muslim) before the violence, and their "other" identity as shamed, conquered and violated by the religious community with whose symbol they were branded. Paradoxically, then, unlike in the case of Hari's circumcision, this violent encoding of religious signs on the woman's body reinforced her previous ethnic identity and her location in the present" (Daiya 227).

In the urgencies of Partition violence, "Hari's conversion through circumcision and prayer recitation becomes for him an everyday tactic that resists the historical effects of Partition that he might otherwise have faced: forced migration, castration, or death" (Daiyah). The difference in impact on male and female sexuality in these violent processes becomes apparent in what follows. When Lenny reveals that Ayah is hiding either on the roof or in one of the go downs to the Ice-candy Man who lies about taking care of Ayah, the mob marches into the house. "What follows is not a test of Ayah's "proper" identity, like Hari's, but her systematic abduction and gang rape. Lenny's eye captures here the moment when sexual desire is communalized - reified through its translation into communal discourse - for its realization. For Ice Candy-Man, who desired Ayah but had been rejected by her for Masseur, identifying Ayah as "Hindu" facilitates

her objectification and violation in order to fulfill his desire for her. This process not only encodes her body as symbolically "Hindu" but also suppresses the historicity of her body in order to construct it as ethnic. Furthermore, Lenny's account of the scene of abduction and its aftermath complicates and calls into question the assimilation of sexual violence into anthropological explanatory narratives of patriarchal, communal, and national honor. Ayah's abduction, after all, is initiated by her friend and admirer who deploys his intimacy and familiarity with Lenny to inflict upon Ayah a sexual intimacy she had earlier rejected. Her abduction "as a Hindu woman" is less about her dishonor as a Hindu, and more about Ice-Candy-Man's use of the communal narratives at hand to fulfill his desire for her (which he sees as his love for her). This literary moment thus questions any easy explanation of sexual violence in the belated terms of national, communal, and patriarchal honor. It reveals that ethnic and national identities are produced not only through normative discourses of culture and community but also through violence - to intimacy, to friendship, and to dehistoricized bodies" (Daiya 230). In the process, it eloquently shows that the issues of identity, ethnicity, and sexuality that were at play in this moment around 1947 were, as Homi Bhabha has argued in a different context, "as much issues of desire and affect as they were part of a wider political and historical discussion of rights and representations." Thus, even as Sidhwa "restore [s] women to [national] history" insofar as she makes visible the violent effects of histories of nation formation on women's lives, she also "suggests that national and feminist histories need to be rewritten through the fraught ambivalences and desiring practices that permeate everyday life, which belie conventional narratives of oppression and victimization, and which are not always centered upon discourses of nation or community" (Daiya 236).

In a political discourse in which women are symbols of a community, the internally sanctioned violence against women within communities never became a politicized issue, for both the political national community and the ethnic community shared the patriarchal ideology that cast women as the property of the men of their community. Manto's short stories in *Mottled Dawn* reveal that Partition's sexual violence was not always of nationalism or ethnicity: for example, the protagonist S in *Woman in the Red Raincoat* abducts a woman because "the desire to pick up a girl took hold of him." Ensuring that his victim in a red raincoat is not English, "because he hated Englishwomen," he marks a site where it is desire, not nationalism or ethnic hatred, that engenders abduction. *Open It* is about how a seventeen-year-old Muslim girl, Sakina, separated from her father as they migrate to Lahore, is 'rescued' by a band of Muslim men purporting to rescue lost and abducted Muslim women and reunite them with their families. Instead of reuniting Sakina with her father, they rape her repeatedly and then abandon her, nearly dead, close to the refugee camp her father was in. Such scenes of intra-ethnic and racialized sexual violence, for which there are no archival histories and that are enabled by this moment of ethnic and international conflict, fall through the cracks of national as well as nationalist histories; this violence remains domestic, private, individual, invisible because, ostensibly, it is about no one's 'honor' but the woman's.

“As early as September, 1947 the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan met at Lahore and took a decision on the question of recovery of abducted women. When they announced that “forced conversions and marriages will not be recognized and women and girls who have been abducted must be restored to their families,” the assumption was that all those abducted would be forcibly converted to the other religion and, because they were forced, such conversions were not applicable. They agreed too that women living with men of the other religion had to be brought back, if necessary by force, to their ‘own’ homes- in other words, the place of their religion” (Rao). “It was a curious paradox- at least for the Indian State. India’s reluctance to accept Partition was based on its self-perception as a secular, rational state, not one whose identity was defined by religion. Yet, women theoretically equal citizens of this nation, could only be defined in terms of their religious identity. Theoretically, at Partition, every citizen had a choice in the nation he/she wished to belong to. if a woman had had the misfortune of being abducted, however, she did not have such a choice” (Bhutalia 139). However, many women protested. They refused to go back. “One might almost say that for the majority of Indian women, marriage is like an abduction anyway, a violation, an assault, usually by an unknown man. Why then should this assault be any different?” (Bhutalia 147). Anis Kidwai, one of the social workers who helped in rehabilitation of abducted women, in her interview says to Bhutalia,” In all of this sometimes a girl would be killed or she would be wounded. The ‘good stuff’ would be shared among the police and army, the ‘second-rate stuff’ would go to everyone else. And every single one of these girls, because she had been the victim of a trick, she would begin to look upon her ‘rescuer’ perforce as an angel of mercy who had, in this time of loot and killing, rescued her, fought for her, and brought her away” (149). Despite the woman’s reluctance to leave, considerable pressure, sometimes even force, was brought to bear on to ‘convince’ them to do so.

“Social workers like Renuka Ray and Purnima Banerji cautioned the government that, in some cases legalized marriages do take place and we have to be very cautious to see that such women who do not wish to cancel such a marriage after so much time has elapsed are not due to our overzealousness also sent back. However, minister like Gopaldaswamy Ayyangar refused to change the clause that denied women a choice on the argument that “Women or abducted persons are rescued from surroundings which, prima facie, do not give them the liberty to make free choice as regards their own lives” (180). “However, the environment they were put into was camped which hardly gave them the option to move freely. The continuous presence of police and social workers and the pressure they inflicted caused greater misery to the rescued women. Also, many of the abducted women were pregnant when rescued, so the choice to take a decision regarding their lives wasn’t an individual one. Each woman who had been taken away was actually, or potentially, a mother. Within the givens of motherhood, her sexuality could be contained, accepted or 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. How 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 this meant that they had to be separated from their children, the ‘illegitimate’



products of their 'illegitimate' unions), and they had to be relocated into the family and the community. Only then would moral order be restored and the nation made whole again, and only then would emasculated, weakened manhood be vindicated" (Bhutalia 190). "The woman as a person did not count, her wishes were of little consequence, she had no right to resist, defy or even to appeal, for the Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act denied even that basic freedom. Not only was she to be forcefully recovered, but if she disputed her recovery, she was (after 1954) allowed to put her case before a tribunal, but beyond that- if the tribunal's findings were seen as unjust-she had no recourse. What lay at the heart of these recovery programs was 'national honour'. If colonialism provided Indian men the rationale for constructing and reconstructing the identity of the Hindu woman as a 'bhadramahila', Independence, and its dark 'other', Partition, provided the rationale for making women into symbols of the nation's honour" (Bhutalia 192).

The violence and torture of partition wasn't directed towards men and women only. Instead, it also engulfed within itself the children of both Hindu and Muslim community. The children of both the communities were subjected to murder, castration, abduction and every other form of violence that was being practiced during that time. All kinds of reasons were put forward for the abduction of children. Bhutalia writes, "According to Damyanti Sahgal and other social workers, the myth about the greater intelligence of Hindus and Sikhs was a commonly held one. It was based on the economic and intellectual success of Hindus and Sikhs generally, and was the counterpart, I am assuming, of the stereotype of the libidinous and rapacious Muslim. Hindus, according to this stereotype, could then be weak physically, but their mental powers were strong, while the Muslims were the opposite. Social workers said most of the children abandoned at the camps were girl children, and the pressure of work made it difficult to screen potential adopters. Many young girls then ended up as domestic workers or as prostitutes, swelling the numbers of the 'whole generation' of young girls that the writer Krishna Sobti said had been 'sacrificed' to Partition. Homes and educational institutions were set up for both girls and boys: but when it came to the time to leave and make an independent life, it was the boys- young men- who were able to do that more easily than the girls or young women" (281).

The violence that was inflicted on women during and post-Partition is very different from what the men experienced. The rationale behind the raping the women, the castration and branding of their bodies and their subsequent murder was very different from the torture that men were subjected to. The women not only became victim of the 'other' community but also their own community. Fratricide, intra-communal rape was rampant during Partition and the biggest victims were the women. Even post Partition, during the recovery programs, women were stripped off their agency and became a pawn in the hands of the patriarchal state who wished to re-install the national honour. The traumatic experience of a girl child also varied from that of a boy. The possibility of a girl child falling into the trap of prostitution and domestic servility was much greater and rampant than that of the boy. What's more tragic on top of everything is that the exploitation and the coercion continue even in the telling of partition narrative. The silence,

the 'other'ing and the consequent domination of patriarchal ideology continue. The Indian writer, Krishna Sobti, argues that, "Partition is difficult to forget but dangerous to remember" (Bhalla). That perhaps explains the reluctance of historians in South Asia to embark on the social and oral history of one of the greatest social dislocations of the past century. While there have been many books looking at the diplomacy and high politics of partition, and numerous biographies of Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah and Mountbatten, it's only very recently that studies have appeared drawing on the testimony of those who lived through the mayhem and examining the local pressures and tensions which contributed to the appalling spiral of violence. And in spite of gathering the testimonies, it's important to remember that the experience and the violation of the female body and agency which happened was vastly different from the experience of men and that the testimonies are gendered in themselves which evokes greater responsibility on part of the researcher to explore the women's question during partition with greater sensitivity, responsibility and depth.

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