

CHAPTER 1

'Un-consulted Objects in their Own Fate'¹

Looking at the Partition of India through the lens of Gender

Akshara Anirjita

ABSTRACT

The Partition of British India in 1947 came at the eve of the Independence of the nation and resulted in the creation of two separate nation states. Memories of Independence for many in the region are sullied by the tragedies that came with it. More than half the millions of people killed, targeted and abducted during and in the aftermath of the Partition were women. This paper strives to understand the tragic and disproportionate targeting of women during the Partition, the nature of this violence, and the woman as the silenced or 'subaltern' citizen. When the governments of India and Pakistan decided to pass treaties to 'recover' abducted women from the other side of the border, many women faced the double burden of being re-abducted, in a sense, once again from a country and from families they had grown to become a part of.

'Belonging and Unbelonging', then, explores the woman as a citizen without boundaries and with no say in her own fate. This is supported by interviews, and legal archives containing acts and treaties passed by the nation states of India and Pakistan. These primary sources are understood through the lens of and juxtaposed with critical theories such as the Marxist sociological 'reification' or objectification, Althusser's (1970) power apparatuses, Berlant's (2001) Citizenship, and Nira Yuval Davis (1989) on the public-private divide. The paper is finally able to understand the often-forgotten woman in Partition historiography, and how she was made to be a passive object in her destiny by three different actors, i.e., her own community, by the 'other' or the communal aggressor, and by the State.

Keywords: *Communalism, Partition, Subaltern, Violence*

Looking at the Partition of India through the lens of Gender

During and in the aftermath of the partition of India in 1947 women stood as symbols of the honour and the authenticity of their community, religion or nation and of the seemingly progressive objectives of the political elite. Both led to a dehumanisation and objectification of the woman at the hands of their community as well as the nation. Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon ask in their book 'Borders and Boundaries' and in independent articles of the same name 'do women have a country?' when answering this question they mostly focus on the 'double displacement' of women that took place because of the abductions of the partition when they were ripped away from their families because of belonging to a particular religion and then when they were 'ripped away' from the new families that they had become accustomed to because of the recovery efforts and dominion treaties of India and Pakistan. This question can be nuanced with the questions 'were women the country?' or ways in which women became symbols of their cultures and nations and 'did women have land in either country?'.

The first question posed can be understood by looking at ways women were reduced to emblems or their 'reification', literally meaning 'thingification' or a dehumanizing and reductive objectification. American theorist Peter Berger applied the Marxist concept of 'reification' to sociology. His construction dismissed the social structural notions that existed behind the earlier definition. For Berger, reification is when a person 'forgets' the human origins of a phenomena or ideology. He believes that human beings begin looking at ideas 'as if they were something else than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will" (Berger and Luckmann, 89). Human beings, then, begin seeing ideas as real, solid and concrete. Berger goes on to explain this 'forgetfulness' as an appeal of persons facing "some fundamental terrors of human existence, notably the terror of chaos" to achieve 'psychic stability' (Berger and Pullberg, 68). Reification, then, is the universal human tendency to see abstractions as things, and the 'chaos' of the partition proved to be the catalyst for the reification of the woman.

Women faced violence during and after the Partition of 1947 not just because they became targets of groups who used them as a means to target their culture and nation, but they also suffered violence at the hands of those in their own community. This is illustrated in the mass 'suicide' in 1947 in Thero Khalsa in present day Punjab, India. Of the Thero Khalsa incident, the Statesman, a leading Anglo-Indian daily of

Volume II Issue I July- December 2022

British India reported the following at the time, “The story of 90 women of the little village of Thoa Khalsa, Rawalpindi district... who drowned themselves by jumping into a well during the recent disturbances has stirred the imagination of the people of Punjab. They revived the Rajput tradition of self-immolation when their menfolk were no longer able to defend them. They held a hurried meeting and it was concluded for the women that all was lost but their honour” (The Statesman, March 15, 1947). This article brings to the fore the influence of leading figures and their influence on communities. Gandhi is quoted in this article as saying that ‘even suicide’ is preferable to submission. This creates the question of submission to whom. The question that begs to be asked is was the ‘whom’ in this question merely the aggressor, or was it the person who belongs to another religion and hence in the case of the partition to the other country; Pakistan for India and India for Pakistan.

In this aforementioned collective suicide, the only people who killed themselves were women, illustrating how women were seen as ‘repositories’ of the nation as well as the ‘honour’ of society and killing them, before they could ‘submit’ to the ‘other’, became a means to save their ‘Nation’, a concept that was fragile at the time, from the enemy. Women hence had become the victims of the double burden of violence from the perceived ‘other’ as well as victims of the violence of their own as is the case evidenced in the article above.

The reification of women, in this way, did not happen just at the hands of their community or the ‘other’ aggressor and enemy, it also happened at the hands of the newly formed Nation-States and their leading political elite. There is a widely circulated picture of Nehru and Lady Mountbatten (found in the Nehru Memorial library and published by Yasmin Khan in her book *The Great Partition*) standing in the Kurukshetra refugee camp in the beginning of 1949. Behind them stand police officers and national guards and in front of them children. Neither of them is engaging with those in the camps as they stand looking away from them. This is an apt illustration of the massive and confusing question that both the newly formed government and the imperialist powers had to face when it came to the refugees that had been created by the Partition and how their views of the future did not take in to account and were not necessarily informed by the views of those who had been displaced. This claim is illustrated in the Recovery acts and treaties passed and agreed upon by these nations to ‘bring back’, the women that had been abducted. The following are the clauses of the Repatriation and Recovery Act deliberated, reached and then finally passed in December 1949 by the newly formed Nation State of India:

‘(1) Every effort must be made to recover and restore abducted women and children within the shortest time possible.

Volume II Issue I July- December 2022

(2) 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 persons concerned are irrelevant and consequently no statements of such persons should be recorded before magistrates. (3) The primary responsibility for recovery of abducted persons will rest with the local police who must put full effort in this matter. Good work done by police officers in this respect will be rewarded. by promotion or cash awards (4) MEOs [military evacuation officers] will render every assistance by providing guards in the transit camps and escorts for the transport of recovered persons from the Transit camp to their respective Dominions. (5) Social workers will be associated actively with the scheme. They will look after the camp arrangements and receive the abducted persons in their own Dominions.’ (quoted by ‘Documents of the Partition’ by Kirpal Singh)

In both the instances of the reification of women, at the hands of her direct community and the nation state, we can see Althusser’s apparatuses of power operating and using his frameworks we can gain a more nuanced perspective of the role of the state and the people in subjugating and targeting the woman during and after the partition. According to Althusser, ‘Ideological State Apparatuses (or ISA’s)’ manufacture ‘consent among individuals. Using ideology and symbolism that are ever present in an individual’s life, they aim to ‘train and condition’ the individual thinks about things and acts that they are ‘led to believe is natural’. These ideological state apparatuses could be thought of as temples, churches, mosques, and families (Resch, 12). The Hindu tradition of ‘fierce chivalry’ and protection of the ‘honor’ of their women is a direct instance of such an apparatus that functioned in the everyday life of the ‘Indian’ individual (Kandiyoti,44)

What is functioning in the aforementioned Acts passed by the newly formed political nation state is the other apparatus of state power that Althusser talks about, that of the Repressive State Apparatus. For Althusser, the repressive state apparatus are instruments of control and influence that compel individuals to act the way that they want them to. This control is exerted by means of ‘threats of punishment’ and by ‘explicit demonstration of power’. In the case of Acts passed after the partition to recover ‘its women’, this repressive apparatus is seen functioning through the political elite and more directly through the police.

In clause (3) it is apparent that the recovery of these abducted women was in the hands of the ‘local police’. While it is true that a lot of the direct work with the abducted women lay with the social workers (clause 5), the very fact that law enforcement had primary responsibility to recover those who were abducted makes it apparent that this was a treaty that did foresee to a certain extent the exertion of force to bring ‘back’ the women. The clause offers promotions and rewards to the officers who do the same, reducing the officers’ incentives to listen to the people they were bringing ‘back’. In interviews, police

Volume II Issue I July- December 2022

officers are seen admitting the fact that they would ‘slap women and tell them that they would be shot if they didn’t inform the police officers of their history of abduction’ because of the deeply entrenched belief amongst police officers in India that women were under the threat of the Pakistani government that was forcing them to hide the truth of their citizenship (as interviewed by Bhasin and Menon, 170).

While this belief of the Pakistani propaganda can be thought of as an ‘ideological state apparatus’ functioning to condition the police officers to do their job, even if this meant the use of violence, to bring back these women from what they believed to be a threatening and oppressive nation state, the clause itself is a repressive state apparatus. The idea of the taking away of the agency of women in choosing where to stay as a paternal and just act by the state ‘interpellated’ the public to accept it as such. The act is a repressive state apparatus, in that it is, passed by the political elite and functions through the police and their threats and use of violence to force compliance from the woman subject. This furthers the image of the woman as an ‘un-consulted object’ in her own fate, as talked about in detail in the historiography of the topic of women and the partition by Pandey and others.

It is important, then, to note the ways in which women became ‘repositories of the nation’ then for the family as well as the State; suffering because of this sociological reification at the hands of both. While defining and dividing the violence perpetrated on women helps us to recognize the different sources of subjugation such a division between the state and the family is not precise and is ultimately futile. Nira Yuval Davis in her book ‘Theorizing Gender and Nation’ gives a reason for this. For Yuval Davis, the public and the private in non-western countries, especially nations that had once been colonized, are inextricable from each other. She imagines the private and civil society, including family, culture, the community of citizens, and the nation state as entangled and irrevocably intersectional to the point that they are symbiotic, with each drawing from the other to form itself and its opinions. This symbiosis she holds especially true when it comes to gender relations in post-colonial states (Davis, 54).). Following in this framework of interdependence the Indian State was drawing from the traditions of the nation on the ways to treat women, as were the citizens of this newly formed State. An instance of such a phenomenon would be features of the aforementioned ideological state apparatus of Hindu traditions, which historian Deniz Kandiyoti defines as predicating masculinity on acting gallant towards the Hindu woman (Kandiyoti, 44).

In the aforementioned clauses of this act, it is apparent that it was based upon their religion, that is whether they were Hindu or not, that the abducted women would be brought back in to what was perceived as their own country and their own community in India from Pakistan and what is now known as Bangladesh. They would be, in this act of being ‘brought back’, separated from the families that they had grown to become a part of, without any say in their fate. The communal lines along which this gendered identification,



Volume II Issue I July- December 2022

recovery and granting of citizenship took place, then, can be seen as being in direct contrast with the commonly held belief, that Ayesha Jalal, in her essay in the Indian Economic and Social history Review *'Secularists, Subalterns and the Stigma of Communalism: Partition Historiography Revisited'*, illustrates as the 'rival paradigms' of the 'two nation theory' that was believed to have been 'lauded in Pakistan' and the opposing view in India that hailed a 'secular and composite view and identification of citizenship' (Jalal, 4). It is interesting then to note the immense support this act generated in the nation at the time, with popular figures in the public eye such as Gandhi quoted in Pandey saying that all 'our' women should be returned at 'any cost' (Pandey, 174),

The repatriation bill and its clauses are indicative of more than merely the ways that the state took away the agency of the women in question, making it clear in clause (1) that the subjects of the act would not be consulted of their status. It is also indicative of the ways in which the state tried to erase the identities of the women in question, in this case that of their once having been Pakistani and tried to insert them in the nation's vision of virginal, following in the aforementioned Hindu tradition of valour towards women and defence of their 'honour'. This is illustrated in the fact that an earlier ordinance had asked for the children of the abducted women were to be left behind in the countries they were being recovered from as this was thought to be something that would increase their acceptance by their families that they had earlier been abducted from (this clause is quoted in Bhasin and Menon, 234). It was when this proved to be intractable that the repatriation bill asked for all women and males under the age of 16 to be returned to the country (Clause 1).

A reading of this act and other state led repatriation efforts can also be nuanced and enriched by an application of citizenship theories to their reading. Lauren Berlant in her article 'Citizenship' writes that the training of citizenship's architecture is a politicized intimacy that turns political boundaries into visceral, emotional and seemingly hardwired responses of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. This 'architecture' of citizenship can be identified in the repatriation and recovery acts as well as the Inter Dominion treaties, as well as public speeches, and the police force responsible for 'interpellation' of the public to accept recovery for instance as an ideal good. It also created a 'political intimacy' as it emphasised that the country's people had something in common, in this case the 'honour of their women' which was being protected for them by the state. While the Indian recovery bill identified the abducted Hindu woman as a citizen, the Inter-Dominion treaty between the two countries identified the Muslim woman in India for the Indian nation as the 'other'.

The idea of this citizenship, actively identifying an 'insider' in direct opposition to and hence directly dependent on the identity of the 'outsider', became co-constitutive with another's lack of the same. This

Volume II Issue I July- December 2022

symbiotic binary is apparent in the aftermath of the partition in that the recovery bill asking for the retrieval of the Indian woman became co-constitutive, from a legal stand point, with the repatriation and later the inter dominion treaty of December 6th 1950 (quoted by Kirpal Singh). This meant that the Hindu woman could not be an Indian citizen until the Muslim woman was recognized as the other and dispossessed by the state, that is stripped of her citizenship rights, including that of inheritance and property, and ‘returned’ to Pakistan. The very idea of the Indian citizen, in this way, was predicated on the formation of the Muslim as the other.

Through the functioning of both the Ideological and Repressive state apparatuses and their permeation of the public and private divide, it becomes apparent the various ways women were reduced to ‘unconsulted objects’ in their communities and subjects of the states without agency. The partition when looked at as the largest forced migration in recent history and when studied in conjunction with its aftermath, makes it obvious the ways in which women were doubly ‘forced’ to migrate, that is at the hands of their abductors and, then through the recovery and repatriation acts, at the hands of the state. In her book ‘Dis-possession; the Performative in the Political’, Judith Butler writes of gender in relation of being ‘dispossessed by the state’. She believes this to be the first sense of dis-possession. According to Butler, ‘the second sense of dispossession is bound to the first.’ Since beings that ‘can be deprived of place, livelihood, shelter, food, and protection’, if they can ‘lose’ their ‘citizenship... homes, and... rights’ then these beings, namely women, can become ‘fundamentally dependent on those powers that alternately sustain or deprive’ them, this subjugates and objectifies the beings as the State and those in it hold absolute power over the being’s, in this case the woman’s ‘very survival’ (Butler, 15). Bhasin and Menon mention the state granting certain rights to women, such as those of citizenship, and then taking away their other rights such as civil and political (Bhasin and Menon, 174). Butler would argue, in line with the fact that even when women have their rights, they become dependent on modes of governance that subjugate them because they ‘sustain their rights, land and modes of belonging.’ (Butler, 15)

This subjugation gets more nuanced when it comes to partition historiography because of the ways that the ideological, that is traditions, values, patriarchy, as well as repressive state apparatuses, through acts passed in parliament and through police force, function closely with one another, drawing from and depending on each other to form themselves and resulting, in this case, in a sort of perennial, omnipresent subjugation of the woman.

References

- Bhattacharya, Neeladri. *Themes in Indian History*. National Institute of Education, Training and Research.
- Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2003.
- Butler, Judith, and Athena Athanasiou. *Dispossession the Performative in the Political: Conversations with Athena Athanasiou*. Cambridge: Polity, 2015.
- Castaing, Anne. "Thinking the Difference: On Feminism and Postcolony." *Samaj*. <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/3689>.
- Didur, Jill. *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006.
- Dutta, Anjali Bhardwaj. 'Gendering Oral History of Partition: Interrogating Patriarchy', *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 41, Issue No. 22, 03 June, 2006.
- Gehlot, N.s. "Book Reviews." *Indian Journal of Public Administration* 48, no. 4 (2002): 769-71. doi:10.1177/0019556120020417.
- Jalal, Ayesha. "Secularists, Subalterns and the Stigma of 'Communalism': Partition Historiography Revisited." *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 03 (1996): 681. doi:10.1017/s0026749x00016644.
- Kandiyoti, Deniz. *Women and National Development: The Complexities of Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.
- Khan, Yasmin. *Great Partition - the Making of India and Pakistan, New Edition*. Yale University Press, 2017.
- Kumar, Anuradha. "Recovering Memories of Partition." *Economic and Political Weekly* 52 (December 23, 2017).
- Malhotra, Aanchal. *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory*. New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2018.
- Menon, Ritu, and Kamla Bhasin. Recovery, Rupture, Resistance: Indian State and Abduction of Women during Partition, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 17, April 24, 1993.

Volume II Issue I July- December 2022

Menon, Ritu, and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders & Boundaries Women in Indias Partition*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2011.

Pandey, Gyanendra. *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Pritam, Amrita. *Pinjar: The skeleton and other stories*. New Delhi: Tara Press, 2009.

Resch, Robert Paul. *Althusser, Marx and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*. Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1992.

Roy, Anupama. *Gendered Citizenship: Historical and Conceptual Explorations*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2005.

Roy, Haimanti. "Partition." *Oxford Bibliographies Online Datasets*, 2015. doi:10.1093/obo/9780195399318-0161.

Roy, Uditi. *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation After the Partition*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Yuval-Davis, Nira and Floya Anthiyas (eds). *Women-Nation-State*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989.

नेगी, नवीन. "बंटवारे की त्रासदी से जुड़ा आम आदमी का सामान (The Partition and Objects of the Ordinary Man) - *BBC News Hindi*, *BBC News*. August 15, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/hindi/india-40937509?SThisFB>.