

GENDERED PARTITION

SARAH MARVI

ASIA 333

Partition, in all its momentous history full of experiences of violence, mass migration, and segregation of one colonial state into two, remains a very solemn part of national, political, religious, cultural, and economic history. Certain events have been essential to the construction of the history of modern South Asia, the Partition of 1947 being one and then again, the independence of Bangladesh as a separate state in 1971 (considered as a second partition).

The ramifications of these events are still felt surrounding contemporary issues in all of what is known as South Asia. After decades of colonial rule, the decision of a division of what was known as the British India perceived as the only response to rising communal tensions between two religious' communities. As a result of constant clashes between the two religious communities, the two-nation theory was formed based on the idea that there is a need for a separate Muslim homeland built out of a fear that once the British departed, Muslims would become marginalized in political spheres. Even though this theory was introduced in the early 1930s, it did not have enough supporters at that time. After a series of rising communal tensions between the All India Muslim League and Indian National Congress, this theory then gained traction by people who feared the safety of the Muslim community under a Hindu majority government. In August 1946, AIML called upon a Direct Action Day, where they urged the Muslim community to act and demand a separate nation. This provoked a series of communal violence between Muslims and Hindus. Almost one year later, Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, hastily adopted the decision of separating the nation into two states. August of the year of 1947, the subcontinent known as British India divided into two, where the Dominion of Pakistan came into being on 14th August as a newly established Muslim-state. On 15th August, India itself became an independent state. The population these of states split up along religious lines, which forced mass migration of around 14 million people where Muslims moved

to Pakistan and Non – Muslims moved to India. This period is marked by communal violence, ethnic cleansing, large-scale dislocation, sexual violence in forms of rape, abduction, sexual mutilation, and disappearance.

This article focuses on the relationship between gendered sexual violence, honor, and women's position in a patriarchal society. Forms of sexualized violence have been continuously used as a tactic of terrorism in different parts of the world. It is identified in mainly conflict-filled regions like Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in Afghanistan, Northern Uganda, Sudan, Burmese, and more recently in places like Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, and Kashmir. Systematic rape has been a method of instilling fear into the opposing community, destroying bonds between families and communities, and imposing humiliation and shame upon others. This article seeks to establish links between violence, gender, honor, traditionalist principles, and women's relationship between the family, community, and the state.

Hence, this article consists of three main sections. The first describes in detail the violence perpetrated against women during partition and how the "traditional belief" of honor is connected to the brutality being gendered. The second section talks about the position of women's sexuality in society and how the same conventional principles of honor are then reconstructed in the nationalist ideology formed on the question of woman. Finally, the third section links both the previous sections on violence and honor to its impact on contemporary gender politics. It uses the example of Kashmir to describe how the same conception of women, gender, and honor has continued into present-day issues and has remained unresolved.

VIOLENCE IN PARTITION

The violence in Partition surpasses any of its kind. The complete brutality that came before and after the announcement of Partition is disconcerting when thought of its impact on million lives. For years, the question remains of what turned decades of communion and interdependence into feelings of hatred, feelings that kept on rising to extreme levels. The idea of ‘other’ was reconstructed and reshaped as being the enemy that had to be destroyed before it destroyed us. And while this partitioning of lives was seen as having affected millions, the women and children both were the two groups within these ‘millions’ that suffered the most.

Initial historiographies of South Asian history focused only on the narrative of certain men deciding the faith of millions that they supposedly represented – the debates between British, Congress, and the Muslim League. Partition was thought of as a division between religious identities, and other identities like gender, caste, class were neglected in this. Men were seen at the forefront of pushing for a separation, but as it has been shown by feminist critics, women and children bore the brunt of the violence injected upon all communities as a result of this event. Some of the famous works in highlighting women’s voices and cementing it as part of the oral and written history of Partition includes Urvashi Butalia’s “The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India” and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin’s “Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s partition.” These books presented perspectives from people who suffered and lived through them. They both cite in these books the sexual violence, in all its savagery, unleashed upon the women on both sides of the border during and after the partition. Some examples include rape, sexual mutilation of women’s body parts like cutting open their pregnant stomachs and breasts and tattooing their sexual organs with symbols of other religions. Women were raped in places of religious sanctity like temples and mosques, situating this violence in a historical, religious context.

Menon and Bhasin (1998) mention the account of a doctor serving at a refugee camp:

“One of the cases that I treated was of a woman from village Chund Bharwana who was the wife of a railway porter. One of her hands was chopped off above her wrist and then was thrown into the fire, as a result of which her lower portion got burnt. But she escaped from there and was then thrown into a well with her two daughters and one son.” (p. 41-42)

This account demonstrates that violence did not end to an extent, but violence was inflicted upon women in different ways. Urvashi Butalia, in her book, speaks about these different kinds of violence inflicted upon women:

Apart from the rapes, other, more specific kinds of violence had been visited on women. Many were paraded naked in the streets; several had their breasts cut off, their bodies were tattooed with marks of the other religion; in a bid to defile the so-called ‘purity’ of the race, women were forced to have sex with men of the other religion, many were impregnated. Sometimes family traded their women in exchange for freedom, at other times, the women simply disappeared, abducted from camps. (Butalia, 1998, p.105)

When we talk about violence, we cannot just speak about the violence done by men of other communities. The violence was inflicted upon women by their own communities which is neglected in this narrative of constructing the ‘other’ as the main perpetrators of aggression. Menon and Bhasin dedicate a whole chapter to different accounts from people who survived the partition where families, communities, and women themselves were complicit in the violence done in the name of preserving honor. They cite one testimony by Durga Rani: “Hindus threw their young daughters into wells, dig trenches and buried them alive. Some were burnt to death, and some were made to touch electric wires to prevent the Muslims from touching them.”

(Menon and Bhasin, 1998, p.32) Women hold a special status in times of conflicts where women's sexuality positioned at the center as a representation of integrity in the family and community. Thus, it results in violence carried out by men of a rival community on women as a statement of their power and to subject the 'other' to humiliation by 'dishonoring' their women. From this stems the other kind of violence where women were forced to die, killed by their own or willingly took their own lives to escape from the sexualized violence. The famous incident of Thoa Khalsa in Rawalpindi perceived as the gendered violence – wherein an attempt of mass suicide, women jumped into a well due to the fear of an imminent attack on the village by the Muslim community. This incident explicitly sets up the formation of the patriarchal ideology where women are considered as the symbol of honor for a man, the community, the society, and the nation itself. This deep-seated notion of men being the 'protectors' of the women and failing to do so results in a conflict where women are subjected to sacrificial kind of violence to uphold respectability. In this framework, women's sexuality is positioned as something to be 'protected' and in turn, positioned as something to be exploited as a way of retaliation and bringing down a particular community. When Menon and Bhasin mention the example of Dr. Virsa Singh, who shot 50 women on account of saving them, they argue that so central is the idea of women's honor upholding the honor of the men and the community, it constitutes another form of violence. "Men against their own kinswomen; and by women against their daughters or sisters and their own selves." (Menon and Bhasin, 1998, p.45) They argue that these 'forced deaths' cannot be accepted as being voluntarily when notions of shame and dishonor are internalized by the women, which leads to submitting to these internalized notions that cannot be classified as having a 'choice.' They also argue that this patriarchal complicity in making this form of violence "permissible" highlights abuse in everyday lives of women and the position of their

sexuality in a patriarchal society. In their various interviews with survivors of Partition, they identify a rupture presented by accounts like these where some men retell them in a heroic sort of way while women tend to ignore the undertones that lie along the lines of mentioning and accepting the communal violence. Unsurprisingly, this ideology continues in the post-colonial era, where it becomes part of the nation-building project, and these concepts restructure in a different context, with various symbolic meanings and different motivations.

HONOR AND WOMEN

In the aftermath of Partition, the two independent governments of India and Pakistan were overwhelmed with complaints about abducted and missing women. Thus, to tackle this issue, the two governments entered into an Inter-Dominion Agreement for rescuing and recovering women as quickly as possible. Approximately 30,000 Hindu and Sikh women were recovered, and 50,000 were recovered from the other side of the border. These abducted women were rescued and brought to refugee camps. Many of the recovered women included those who were pregnant or those who already had given birth. Most of these women seen as contaminated by the 'other' were installed in rehabilitation camps and had to go through the process of 'purification.' The issue in the use of the word 'abducted' is that all women were conflated under this umbrella term, where ones who resisted were also forced to leave. This resulted in more displacement and dislocation because most families refused to take them back as they had been 'dishonored.' There were also many women who did not want to "go back" to their families. Hence, the question of recovery was also linked to honor, and the issue was related to that one of religious conversion. The identities of these women were defined by their religious communities. As Butalia (1998) mentions, "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.” (p.110-111)

The issue of honor and religious identities then formed a part of the nation-building project.

India, now considered to be a secular state, not defined by the religion, then had to question how to build their own identity as a nation on the global stage. Partha Chatterjee (1989), in his article, “Colonialism, nationalism, and colonized women: the contest in India,” addresses the state’s struggle with establishing a nation that adopted the Western modernist ways of living but also maintained their cultural traditions. Chatterjee describes the justification provided for colonialism was to civilize the sub-continent, imagining the oppression of women not only by men but the very culture of that society. By assuming a state of sympathy and siding with the oppressed women, the British created the figure of a woman as something to safeguard from the very traditionalist society. He then presents a framework in which the project of nationbuilding takes its course where the colonial construct is divided into two realms: the material and spiritual. The material realm is where the nation adopts the western ideologies of economic and political development like science, technology, etc. The spiritual is where the traditionalist practices are kept intact because in this domain is where the East considers itself to be superior to the West. This nationalist ideological framework is then further classified into outer and inner space. External, that is, the material realm then becomes where the state establishes western practices for the country to flourish. Inner, that is the spiritual realm is where the true identity of the Indian nation lies and uphold the values of culture and honor. As Chatterjee (1989) illustrates, “Applying the inner, outer distinction to the matter of concrete day-to-day living separates the social space into ghar and bahir, the home and the world.” (p.624) This establishment of dichotomy extends itself to gender as well, where the roles of men and women diverge. Men are

then in control of the material, outer domain, and women are in charge of the spiritual, inner realm. Within this ideological framework, Chatterjee (1989) explains, is how the nationalists answer the “women’s question.” (pg. 625)

The ‘new woman’ assimilates herself into the modern world but does not entirely become like western women. She is defined by caste, by class relations and by other identities. This ‘new woman’ adjusts to the modernist policies and plays the role of preserving culture and tradition through reinforcing the inherent feminine values in day-to-day lives. These values endorsed are in contrast to the ‘ordinary’ woman as he describes: “the “common” woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males.” (Chatterjee, 1989, p.627) Chatterjee then argues that this ideology formed, subjected women to a new kind of patriarchy. Patriarchy, where even though women were allowed to be in the public domain by venturing outside, getting an education and taking employment outside, it was their responsibility to bring the traditions alongside them in the public sphere. These values were judged by physical markers like their dress, their social attitude, their devotion to their religion, etc.

It is in the post-colonial era, where the state exercised its authority of reformation of the nation. Independence changed the lives of women drastically, where they went from being concerned about the private sphere to the public sphere. Women themselves got involved with the recovery program and were heavily involved with social reform inside the rehabilitation camps. This development made completely different the lives of women in the post-colonial state. When we look at Chatterjee’s explanation of how the nationalist ideology was born out of the colonial discourse and situated the idea of ‘woman’ as representing the ‘pure’ virtues like chastity, submission, self sacrifice, we see a continuity of previous conceptualizations where woman is

linked to honor of the men, community and the nation. An understanding is offered into how violence during partition was gendered and also how this framework influenced the recovery and rehabilitation of women by two independent states. Previously, the belief about the honor of women concerned the family, community, and the men, this extends it being considered with the post-colonial state as well.

UNRESOLVED CONFLICTS

As we contemplate the brutality that resulted from Partition and the ideologies birthed out of it, we cannot ignore the consequences and its impacts on contemporary issues in the present day. Partition hinged on a religious divide, and this discord between two major religious communities is still prevalent in everyday lives. Even after a decade of gaining independence, communal tensions between both countries remain constant. Both countries, India and Pakistan, are still heavily identified through religion, meaning one is a Hindu nation and the other a Muslim nation. The relations between both are full of misjudgment, suspicion, and hatred. An example of existing hostility in recent times is the rise in tensions between the countries at the beginning of 2019. A suicide attack took place in Indian-administered Kashmir that killed around 40 Indian paramilitary convoys, which were then claimed by a Pakistan-based armed group. This escalated to a massive deadlock between the two nuclear-armed countries. Days after the attack, an Indian fighter jet bombed in a region in Pakistan claiming to have hit an armed group base. In response, two Indian fighter jets were shot down, and an Indian pilot captured. The pilot was released days later as a gesture of peace by Pakistan. This period of rising tensions identifiable by feelings of dread, fear, and apprehension amongst the general public of both countries. I distinctly remember how the threat of a nuclear war shook everyone to the very core. We were in that split moment reminded of the four battles fought after Partition, the lives lost on both sides of the border, the

fear-induced, the remorse that was felt, and acknowledgment of those who suffered the most (meaning women and children). The escalating tensions served as a reminder of the unresolved conflicts that have been there since the partition. The disputes, a direct result of colonization and the historical event of Partition, cited by South Asian scholars as to the beginning of a long-standing problem rather than a solution.

When we discuss unresolved conflicts, we cannot consider it without bringing the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir into the spotlight. The currently disputed area has been central to the apprehensive relations between India and Pakistan. Kashmir divides into three regions, each controlled by three interlocking countries – India, Pakistan, and China. India holds the most substantial part of Jammu and Kashmir under their rule. Angana P. Chatterji (2012), in her article “Witnessing as Feminist Intervention in India-Administered Kashmir,” discusses extreme militarization of the Kashmir by the Indian government and the forms of gendered violence that is still ongoing. She describes how the Indian government has justified its total militarization of the region as necessary for controlling the border to prevent from ‘terrorists’ entering into the region. As the India-administered Kashmir has a Muslim majority, the nation and the media engaged in painting these ordinary Muslims as the enemy and violent to, once again, justifying their clear position on having complete military control over the region. Citing the continuous violence the region has seen since 1990, Chatterji then explains how the violence against men has left a “space” for violence against vulnerable women to be carried out. She also goes on to discuss two specific cases of abuse: those against two Muslim women Asiya and Neelofar. On May 29th, these two women reportedly left their homes for work, and on the morning of May 30th, their bodies were found in the “Red Zone,” battered and bruised. Evidence of gang rape came days after, and the suspicion directed towards police officers instead of directing it towards

the Indian convoys on whose territory their bodies were found. As discussed before, violence against women of the 'other' community is done to assert dominance and cultural identity. "The body is signified as cultural property, and rape as a deliverance of "justice" enacted to punish the woman." (Chatterji, 2012, p. 193) The emphasis on religious identities seen in the partition era is still present in India's control of Kashmir, which is a Muslim-majority region. As Chatterji (2012) states, one's status of being a Muslim becomes essential to being treated as a social, political entity under the government that consists of a Hindu majority. One's Muslim identity is then associated with that of being violent and dangerous. The presence of hundreds of military forces in the region of Jammu and Kashmir has led to many uncountable cases of gendered violence carried out against women in the area. In April 1990, a female nurse was abducted from the hospital and was then found dead on the roadside in Srinagar. It was confirmed she was raped and then shot dead. In March of 1992, armed rebels broke into a residential house of a lorry driver, and his wife and daughter killed after being raped. In another case, an eight-year-old belonging to a Muslim family was held captive, repeatedly raped, and then eventually killed by allegedly eight Hindu men. In February 1991, soldiers of Rajputana Rifles assembled and allegedly raped around 150 girls and women on a rampage. These are only several of the various other cases of gendered violence that have gone unheard and have not been adequately investigated by the government. Connecting the rape of women to dishonoring them with their family and community is still a widespread practice in the region of Kashmir. Violence like this has continuously been reminiscent of the mass sexualized violence during the Partition era. Many who suffered are shunned from society as having lost their virtue, and it has been shown that due to lack of social support, nearly all cases go unheard and go unreported or not discussed with families.

As these instances of gendered violence are explored, I feel also compelled to include the recent developments that occurred in August of 2019. On August 5th, India revoked Article 370, which provided the Indian-administered region of Jammu and Kashmir “special status.” Due to political altercations between the two countries and the long-standing disputed territory of Kashmir, the UN Security Council commissioned a ‘free and impartial plebiscite’ where the region could decide by themselves their political future. Article 370 granted autonomy to the area, and after this article was revoked, the district went into lockdown with no access to cellular and internet services. One of the arguments given for this revocation was that it would lead to gender equality and release Muslim-women from the victimhood they were subjected to by the Muslim community. The retraction by the Indian government was deemed as a calculated move into integrating the region of Kashmir entirely under the control of Indian “democracy”. In the aftermath of this lockdown, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have made several misogynistic and degrading remarks about how the Indian men can now have the “fair-skinned Kashmiri women.” In light of this, the domination of Kashmir becomes equivalent to authority over Kashmiri women’s bodies. Under the feminist lens, it is argued that the process of integrating this region fully into the Indian nation is taking place through a gendered lens. Forms of sexualized violence like rape, assault, and regular harassment have since then been imposed upon the women in Kashmir. These recent events bring us back full circle to the patriarchal conception of women’s bodies being territories that have to be conquered, hence, resulting in violence and infliction of shame and humiliation onto the community those women belong in.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the colonial era, the Indian subcontinent was divided into two states: the newly formed state of Pakistan and the independent state of India. This pivotal decision of separation

based on religious identification came as the only “logical” solution the British adopted to communal tensions between two major religious communities. However, this decision proved to be highly consequential for the future of both countries and the relationship between them. The brutality witnessed during the Partition era, along with confusion, displacement, violence, disruption, and the massacres, all surpass anything of this sort. In a transnational context, it can be compared to other historically horrific events around the world. The objective of this paper was to link the historical episode that was a decade ago, the immense suffering undergone by people, especially women and children, the position of sexualized violence in conflicts, and discuss the impact on contemporary issues.

This venture into writing about this piece of history has been one of pain and discomfort. I have read over 30 articles and learned more than I have ever in my 20 years of growing up in Pakistan. This history has always been shared in whispered words by our grandparents, an account overshadowed, ignored in favor of more recent political, religious, and cultural issues. It is a history that is not taught with open honesty in books and has always been retold with undertones of heroism and jubilation of having an independent state. The human cost of this independence never discussed. It is considered a significant segment of the history of the nation; it has since then shaped our lives and future of the states. The impact on the formation and emergence of contemporary issues is recognized; however, connection to the historical context surrounding these issues has been repeatedly disregarded.

By providing a framework where women are positioned as the mediator of integrity between the family, community, and the state, we can see how the same ideologies are rebuilt and reconstructed in different contexts - resulting in the same gendered violence practices. The attention given to the link between honor and women helps us reflect on how we, as part of

society, are reinforcing the same mechanism that establishes itself in troublesome ways. In this framework, we rethink the issue of Kashmir as not just being a disputed territory but how different power relations and historical context come into play surrounding the various politics in the region.

REFERENCES

Menon, R., Bhasin, K. (1998). *Borders & boundaries: women in India's Partition*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.04642>.

Butalia, U. (2000). *The other side of silence: voices from the partition of India*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.04612>.

Chatterjee, P. (1989). Colonialism, nationalism, and colonized women: *The contest in India*. *American Ethnologist*, 16(4), 622-623. 10.1525/ae.1989.16.4.02a00020

Chatterji, P. A., (2012). *Witnessing as feminist intervention in India-administered Kashmir*. In

Loomba, A., & Lukose, R. A. (2012). *South Asian feminisms*. Durham: Duke University Press.