

## Chapter 3

### Representing Women's Issues: from Victimhood to Agency

In our day, the political partition of India in 1947 has become a condensed metaphor for ethnic conflicts and atrocities against women. Time and again, major ethnic conflicts in the Indian subcontinent have called forth Partition memories: the 1962 "Hazrat Bal" riots in East Pakistan, Hindu genocides and mass evacuation from East Pakistan in 1971, Sikh massacres in Delhi, 1984; Bhagalpur riots of 1989, the Ram Janam Bhoomi crisis in Ayodhya, 1992; and the Gujarat ethnic cleansing of 2002. Instead of fading into a sepia-coloured history, the trauma of Partition still remains unhealed. The major violence that flared in Delhi, Mumbai (then Bombay) and other major cities in the turn of the millennium provoked responses from the leftist intellectuals as well as the Indian Women's Movement. As I have mentioned in the introduction, the April 24, 1993 issue (28:18) of the *Economic and Political Weekly* was a landmark publication, featuring eight key articles by Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, Ratna Kapur and Brenda Cossman, Karuna Chanana, Achin Vanaik and

others, under the collective heading “Community, State and Women’s Agency”. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from Partition of India* by Urvashi Butalia and *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin followed in 1998. These groundbreaking works incorporated interviews of Partition survivors, mostly women, and the authors’ complex musings on these dialogues from a feminist perspective into a moving narrative on Partition and its historiography. For the first time traumatized and abducted women, whose stories were silenced by their communities, became a *subject* of history. A similar political stance and an attempt to write a gendered narrative of Partition are often found in novels written after the paradigm shift of the long nineties.

In the previous chapters, we have elaborately discussed how the novelists until the seventies situate themselves in a Nehruvian secular-liberal problematic, and respond to the Eurocentric narrative of progress in different ways. They approach the life of women in their communities through the available model of *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft*, and come up with observations that are alien to the turn of the millennium reader and author for whom the Nehruvian frameworks are “signposts to cities that are abandoned and empty” (Das 1994:1). Frequently found motifs in this part of our corpus is the communal control of domestic life, women’s public career/political thinking, prevention of inter-community marriages, and the graphic depiction of violence unleashed on women, and their tragic loss of honour or retaining it through a culturally lauded act of

self-immolation. While every novelist in our corpus depicts the subjection of women and gender-specific violence in a similar fashion, their narratives are created inside different discursive frameworks; and therefore, are products of different power/knowledge configurations. This applies both to writings *on* women as well as *by* women. Modernity has indeed stood for the liberation of women from social chains that restricted their movement in the name of tradition, and the postcolonial critic is not exactly denouncing or opposing such a celebratory role. As Spivak comments in an interview,

Although I think internationalism is one of those unifying alibis for decolonization, it is still a strategy I admire or appreciate. It's the kind of strategy where without destroying these ideas one also shows that they have historical fault lines, you know, secularism, nationalism, internationalism, culturalism. If one sees how these things develop historically and how it's tied up with the hegemony of, basically, Western Europe, one can see that it's not that the ideas are bad, but that the ideas are vulnerable, and the ideas are especially vulnerable if they're thought of as transcendental or universal. As a decolonized citizen you take a distance from them; you don't throw them away. (1990: 76)

This conscious distancing from the grand narratives becomes a regular feature of fictional representation after the long nineties. This paradigm shift has gone unnoticed: researchers have commented on the depiction of atrocities on women in Partition fiction, but failed to connect the historical/cultural *a priories* of these narratives and the *meanings* they offer. This chapter intends to fill the gap by exploring how the novels under consideration interpret gender issues from different discursive configurations.

*“Communal” Patriarchy and “Inhuman” Enemies: Community, Women and Partition in the pre-Eighties Novels*

Within the liberal-rationalist problematic, patriarchal control on women is interpreted as *traditional*, an accusing adjective pointing at the essentially retrogressive nature of Asiatic/Oriental cultures. While not dismissing the project of modernity, we need to understand, from a postcolonial-poststructuralist standpoint, the Eurocentric premises on which these assumptions, found in plenty in the first wave novels, stand. A bourgeois liberalism stands for the freedom of the individual from the tentacles of the organic community, which must give way to a modern society based on rationality.

Women have to be empowered and given her place in the political life of the nation. To authors such as Mumtaz Shah Nawaz and Attia Hosain, what hindered such a project in India was the pressure exerted by a “communal” patriarchy, which not only obstructed the path of a modernised domesticity but also exercised authoritative control over the free public lives and political choices of women of their communities. Partition is seen

as the natural outcome of such cultural incompatibility with modernity. Violence on women is similarly seen as the free reign of a blind force of ethnicity/tradition, the loss of morality and the end of civilization. As elaborated in previous chapters, the liberal-rationalist view of history is humanity's uphill journey towards a perfect modernity dictated by reason. If there are deviations from this clearly defined path, as could be seen in Asiatic and African ethnic nationalisms, they are interpreted as aberrations, resulting from their social limitations (Plamenatz 1976, Gellner 1983; Anderson 1991).

Mumtaz Shah Nawaz, working inside this available framework, takes an authorial stance favouring the sanctified ideals of the western bourgeois modernity such as equality, autonomy of the individual and secularism. This project is carried out through her use of the omniscient narrator, who comments on the motives of the characters from a vantage point of modernity, as well as her juxtaposition of modern young women and formidable patriarchs. Her representation of the pre-Partition decades continually plays up the conflicts between traditional/ethnic sentiments and liberal ideals at the threshold of modernity. *The Heart Divided* is a brooding narrative that intertwines the history of the nationalist movement with the impending change in the lives of Muslim women (the women of Shah Nawaz's family were the first in Lahore to cast off the veil) in two decades preceding Partition. In doing so, she offers a liberal-rationalist reading of Indian nationalism and Indian modernity as hybrid indigenous products sadly limited by communalism.

For the Indian Muslims, the coming of modernity meant a reluctant opening of the windows of the *zenana* to education and individualism, even if for a very small section of the upper-class women. Those who experienced the cautious and ambiguous changes were torn between visions of freedom and the reality of existing norms of tradition. In *The Heart Divided*, Mehrunnisa Begum is anxious about her college-going daughter Zohra's liberal manners. In the first chapter, When Zohra asks her parents' permission to go shopping, her mother reminds her to keep sitting in the car and not enter into conversation with shopkeepers:

She was always a little afraid of her younger daughter, in whom she could see the beginnings of *those strange modern ways* that had already entered some Muslim families.... *How shameless they were, she thought, yet they belong to an old and respectable Muslim family.* How could they go about in such a manner, talking freely to strange men, who were not their fathers or their brothers, or their husbands? (*THD* 2)

Mehrunnisa is alarmed at her daughter's attempt to cross the sacred threshold of "tradition". Zohra's gradual coming out of the veil indicates the intrusion of modernity. If Zohra's grandparents and her mother stand for traditional values, her foreign-returned father stands for modern influences. She learns to dodge the tradition/modernity dilemma by wearing the veil while going out and then removing it

and tucking it inside her bag. Parents, and more obviously, mothers-in-law appear as monstrous guardians of tradition, obstructing the path of not only modern homemaking and modern medical science but also women's participation in politics and community service. Zohra's sister Sughra is married into a family in Multan. Orthodoxy wins when she fails to introduce a dining table and other western furniture in her new home: her mother in law insists that they have meals sitting on the floor. The overbearing mother-in-law also detests modern doctors and hospitals. Sughra's son succumbs to stomach ulcers when her mother-in-law gives him butter-toast, ignoring the doctor's advices. The child's death announces the final defeat of modernity for her, after which Sughra decides to separate from her husband Mansur. They reunite near the end of the novel, when a penitent Mansur devotes time and money to set up a modern school and an advanced hospital for children.

In Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Laila is the counterpart of Shah Nawaz's protagonist Zohra – secular-liberal, educated and bookish. Following her deceased father's wishes, her aunt brought her up in a "modern" way, which Uncle Mohsin – the representative of ethnicity and traditionalism in the novel – constantly mocks. The following words of persuasion from Aunt Abida sums up the situation: "... there are certain rules of conduct that must be observed in this world without question. You have a great responsibility. You must never forget the traditions of your family no matter to what outside influences you may be exposed....Never forget the family into

which you were born” (38). Ironically, the family itself was going through changes: Laila’s uncle Hamid disappointed his father by joining the Indian Civil Service instead of looking after the estate. It was perceived as a defeat of feudalism in the hands of progress.

Attia Hosain and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz depict the lives of educated and liberal Muslim women of the thirties and the forties as a futile struggle against a “communal” patriarchy. While political activism was required on the part of Muslim women, it clashed with retrogressive *purdah* customs; there was intimidating moderation of their politics when it seemed to merge into the mainstream nationalist programmes. *The Heart Divided* revives a minor history that the nationalist narratives are often silent about: the participation of Muslim women in the freedom movement. Talking about Zohra’s wonderful performance at the debate, Habib observes that times are changing, as Muslim women are joining the freedom movement in increasing numbers:

‘Some Muslim ladies in other parts of India actually took part in the Civil Disobedience movement last year, and even from our own province, a Muslim lady has gone to the Round Table Conference. I remember all the English papers praising her speeches last year. Our women must come out of *purdah* now, for we shall never make any progress until they do.’ (THD 70)

Zohra is keen to take part in public life, in the ongoing nationalist movement headed by the Congress. However, the incompatibility of the western liberal model and the Islamic model of representation was most clearly seen in 1937, when the Muslim league claimed itself to be the sole representative of Indian Muslims even after securing 4.2 per cent of the total Muslim votes. Only a Muslim, according to them, could be a representative of Muslims. This communal Islamic representative model demands sacrifice from its women. As Jinnah said in his Lahore 1940 address:

Women can do a great deal within their homes *even under purdah*.... the objects of the central committee were... (3) to carry on an intensive propaganda amongst Muslim women throughout India in order to create in them a sense of a greater political consciousness – because if political awareness is awakened in our women, remember, your children will not have much to worry about. (*THD* 44-45)

Jinnah had to make such an ambivalent comment to approve of the traditional-cultural core of Islamic ethnocentrism. Shah Nawaz ironically undercuts such a claim in the following dialogue between Sughra and Fahmida, League supporters and Begum Haider, a friend's wife:

Begum Haider looked at her scornfully. “Women of respectable families don't give up their purdah to meet their husband's friends,” she said, “at

least not in Delhi” . . . “Ah well,” said Fahmida, ... “Leaving aside the question of purdah, I wish ladies like you would come to our Muslim League women’s meetings ... the sad plight of our own people is such that we women must come forward.”

“And play our part in the civic and political life of the country,” added Sughra.

“Such things are better left to the men,” said Begum Haider (*THD* 334-35)

When told about Jinnah’s appeal to the women to participate in the Pakistan movement, Begum Haider proudly retorts that she never reads the newspapers. She has no intention to send her daughter to a girls’ school, she tells Sughra and Fahmida. Silence follows such an assertion. In Shah Nawaz’s representation, sexual politics is connected with communalism as Sheikh Jamaluddin persuades Zohra to accept his orthodox reading of the Nehru Report which tried to bring about a secular politics by getting rid of separate electorates for Muslims. College-going youngsters/activists like Zohra and Mohini, who think and act within the horizon of liberal-democratic politics and the modern, secular worldview, are pitted against strange new political developments and rising sentiments they understand to be communal and regressive. After Mohini is arrested for picketing and defying section 144 of the CPC, Zohra and Surayya cannot keep themselves away

from the nationalist struggle. After leading a successful anti-British demonstration at the college, Zohra is admonished by her father for her actions, which go against the interest of her community. Sheikh Jamaluddin talks about his fears of Hindu hegemony and the indispensability of separate electorates and safeguards, which the Nehru Report intends to abolish. He wants his daughter's allegiance to the course of action determined by Jinnah's fourteen points: "I hope you understand things better now. I want your promise to refrain from political activities" (*THD* 44).

The "communal" patriarchy also successfully thwarts the love affairs of young men and women belonging to separate communities. Critics have not always taken this device kindly. M.K. Naik, for example, asks, "Why must Hindu heroes of Partition novels fall, with monotonous regularity, in love with Muslim girls alone?" (220). The answer is that nothing else is capable of disenchanting the liberal, educated 'heroes' and 'girls' more effectively, showing them the bleak future of secular marriages. "Modernity tends to be explicit and angular. In its early spring, it presented to the Hindu and Muslim elites an impossible demand: Mix more deeply, or separate," remarks Krishna Kumar in his Foreword to the Penguin edition of *The Heart Divided*. The list is long: Habib and Mohini in *The Heart Divided*, Jugga and Nooran in *Train to Pakistan*, Arun and Nur in *Azadi*, and so on.

In *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Laila's cousin Kemal falls in love with Sita Agarwal when they met in London. According to Saleem, Sita was enjoying his attention until things took a more serious turn. "But for all her sophistication, scratch her and you'll find an orthodox Hindu full of prejudices against Muslims" (SBC 196) he feels. Moreover, Sita's attitude opened his eyes to the realities of the communal problem: "What can you expect from a religion which forbids people to eat and drink together?" (SBC 197) he asks. However, the narrator informs that Sita saved the lives of her Muslim friends when the riots begin.

In *The Heart Divided* Jamaluddin deems it his duty to police the activities of women to ensure his family's conformity to the norms pursued by the community. Like tradition and communal identity, women have to *receive* their politics from the elders; and they have as limited choices in these matters as they do in personal matters such as choosing their life-partners. Jamaluddin flies into a rage when he learns of his son Habib's intention to marry Mohini, an intellectual equal, though she belongs to another community:

... Jamaludin had been touched in the inner core of his being where the most sacred trust is the honour of the womenfolk of his own and his friends' families.

‘Do you realize that you are referring to a daughter of the haughty Kashmiri Pandits,’ he continued, ‘who are as proud of their lineage and their pure blood as we are of our own? Don’t you know that for a Muslim even to have such thoughts about her is an insult to the family and to the community?’ (THD 190)

Habib and Mohini’s extinguished romantic affair leaves a waft of fragrant smoke, ending with the death of a broken-hearted, frail Mohini. Such a closure of the secular future foreseen by the young lovers leaves a painful realisation that religion and politics have succeeded in separating even the educated liberal elites: from each other, and from their ideal. An overwhelming sense of desperation attacks Zohra as the Khaksar army violently clash with the police on the streets of Lahore with grave clothes tied to their backs. She is appalled to hear the subterranean rumblings of overwhelming historical forces.

A major theme commonly found in the first wave novels is the violence unleashed on women and the loss of honour. ‘*Izzat*’ is a frequently used word in India’s partition narratives. Loosely translated as ‘honour’/ ‘prestige’/ ‘shame,’ *izzat* stands for a code of conduct. To the novelists such as Khushwant Singh and Chaman Nahal, this age-old word is inextricably entangled with communalism and violence, coming from within and outside of the community. “It is much easier for the men to kill their women

than for women to act against their daughters,” Bapsi Sidhwa remarks in an interview with Alok Bhalla, “for men, izzat, honour, is somehow more important. This is certainly the case in the region I come from” (236).

The pre-eighties fictional representation usually expresses outrage through a montage of stark images of violence on women, much in the fashion of Manto’s short stories. Novels such as Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* and Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi* or Manohar Malgonkar’s *Bend in the Ganges* focus on the physical violence unleashed on women in the Partition riots. In *Train to Pakistan*, Nehru’s famous independence speech is juxtaposed with Sundari’s tryst with destiny. Muslims attack the bus in which Sundari, the newlywed daughter of the Magistrate’s orderly, and the bridegroom’s party were travelling. A graphic description of sexual violence follows:

She stopped daydreaming as the bus pulled up. There were large stones on the road. Then hundreds of people surrounded them. Everyone was ordered off the bus. Sikhs were just hacked to death. The clean-shaven were stripped. Those that were circumcised were forgiven. Those that were not, were circumcised. Not just the foreskin, the whole thing was cut off. She who had not really had a good look at Mansa Ram was shown her husband completely naked. They held him by the arms and legs and one man cut his penis and gave it to her. The mob made love to her. She

did not have to take off any one of her bangles. They were all smashed as she lay on the road, being taken by one man and another and another.

(TP 177)

The problem with representations such as this is that concentrating solely on the physical aspects of violence transforms writing into an emotionally detached exercise, which runs the risk of degenerating into ‘pornography of violence’ (Bourgeois 2001) where voyeuristic impulses hinder the larger project of witnessing, critiquing, and writing against violence. As Sharon Marcus would have it, the “gendered grammar of violence” (392) in such representations actually reiterates the cultural constructions of male power, powerlessness of the female “victim”, and rape as the irreparable loss of a woman’s *virtue*. Singh is writing from within such a discursive formation of *izzat*.

Similar problems plague Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi*, where the protagonist Arun kills a Pakistani major after he rapes Sunanda, a woman from the refugee camp. As they plan to escape through Muslim areas and cornfields, Arun suggests she change into the dead major’s clothes to look like a man:

She had rolled up the bottoms to suit her height and she had stuck her blouse inside the trousers. In spite of the tragedy of the situation, Arun couldn’t fail to observe what a ravishing figure she had – tiny, but sumptuous. He was glad they had the jersey with them; no one would

have taken her for a man otherwise. Only when she donned the jersey was her heavy femininity somewhat hidden from the eye. (A 274)

A contemporary reader would find such descriptions objectionable: it leaves the rapist, the rescuer and the narrator on the same cultural platform which objectifies women. Another such passage from *Azadi* gives a clinical description of a parade of abducted Hindu women in Sialkot to convey the horror of *primitive* violence and the ethical crisis created by communalism.

There were forty women, marching two abreast. Their ages varied from sixteen to thirty, although, to add to the grotesqueness of the display, there were two women ... who must have been over sixty. They were stark naked. Their heads were completely shaven ... so were their pubic regions ... their faces were formed into grimaces and they were sobbing .... The bruises on their bodies showed they had been beaten and manhandled. Their masters walked beside them and if any of the women sagged or hung behind, they prodded her along with the whip they carried....*It no longer remained a lewd scene; it became evil incarnate. Darkness was added to darkness and a strange terror was let loose on earth....* Many men in the front rows of the crowd lifted their lungis to display their genitals to them. Others aimed articles at them and tried to

hit them....they stared at the pubic regions of the women. Through indelicate exposure those areas had lost their glory, lost all magic, and there was only a small, slippery aperture you saw there. (A 262, emphasis added)

Using Foucault's power/knowledge framework, we can read the above passage as a *confirmation* of social knowledge constitutive of contemporary norms and models, which construct the "glory" and "magic" of "those areas". The author's political position, instead of empowering women, only reduces them further to the cultural position of vulnerability and restricts the identities available to women as gendered beings. The above passage betrays (unintended and discursive) sexual objectification of victims. Dominated, bruised, and humiliated, the victims are reduced to the conduits of sadism. In all Partition literature, this is a most remarkable example of pornography of violence, as spectacle overwhelms the understanding of the symbolic nature of violence and completes the objectification of women. Though sympathetic towards the victim, Nahal and Singh mourn the loss of their *izzat*. They perceive this atrocity on women to be the end of morality and civilization – an apocalypse brought about by communalism, the evil incarnate.

*Writing a Long-Nineties Gendered History of Partition: Testimonial literature for the Indian Subaltern*

Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) was a landmark research on the women's experience of Partition. The post-nineties women novelists have mentioned Butalia and her work as shaping influences. Manju Kapur, for example, mentions Butalia in the acknowledgement page of *Difficult Daughters*; and Shauna Singh Baldwin mentions that Butalia's articles and *The Other Side of Silence* have been invaluable to her as print sources. For Butalia, the impulsion to engage in such a project comes from the 1984 anti-Sikh brutalities perpetrated in Delhi and other cities in north India after the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's violent death in the hands of her own Sikh bodyguards. According to Butalia, this unexpected attack led to a realization on the part of aged Sikhs that the spectres of Partition had still not been laid to rest. Elderly people, who had migrated to Delhi from west Punjab, would recall the experience of having to go through a similar scourge in 1947. Butalia interrogates the closure she finds in the dominant nationalist narrative on Partition: "it took 1984 to make me understand how ever present partition was in our lives too ... I could no longer pretend that this was a history that belonged to another time, to someone else" (Butalia 6). Her effort to understand Partition as a socio-political reality was soon frustrated, as both the archival material and the research methodology were insufficient for such an undertaking. The existing nationalist historiography situated Partition solely in the unfortunate political

developments of pre-independence India: the widening difference between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, the roles played by major figures such as Gandhi, Nehru and Sardar Patel; rising communalism in Jinnah's politics, and the inglorious decrescendo of the freedom movement in fratricidal violence. The nationalist discourse sought to shroud Partition in a veil of silence, as if such a disgraceful setback never disrupted the process of nation-building. And then, the way a person *experiences* their position in a particular socio-political and discursive matrix, "what we might call the 'human dimensions' of this story" (Butalia 7), is absent from the traditional nationalist history. It follows that one has to look for Partition not in the archives but the restructured subjectivities of Partition survivors: in the voices of women silenced by social norms, telling the stories of their *unspeakable* fates. In the first chapter of her work, Butalia refers to James E. Young's *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* (1990) as one of the major influences that went to the making of *The Other Side of Silence*. Musing on Young's introduction to his work, Butalia realizes that the reconceptualisation of Partition history ultimately leads to questions on historiography: "Young poses the question: how can we know the Holocaust except through the many ways in which it is handed down to us?" (9). One's knowledge of Holocaust is mediated not only through the official history, Young points out, but also its literary, historical, political and personal representations. Butalia questions *not* the importance of the mainstream history, but the absolute truth-claim it makes. Facts, dates, statistics are as important as

the way people choose to remember and represent them: the “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’” she remarks (10). This assertion reviews the ideology of existing paradigms of nationalist as well as the Marxist historiography in vogue until the eighties. She foregrounds micro-history and oral narratives, not as substitutes but crucial supplementary components, and points at the central debates in historiography of our day: does the historian present an objective truth? In addition, who speaks for Indian pasts?

In her work, Butalia deconstructs the idea of history as an empiricist and impartial project and proposes to supplement the mainstream nationalist history by shedding light on its dark ‘underside’: interviewing Partition survivors and interpreting them from a feminist perspective. If earlier research suffered from the one-chapter-on-gender syndrome, Butalia and her comrades brought it to the centre of historiography. Butalia’s post-Eurocentric historiography has its roots in post-World War scholarship of Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson. In the 1970s, they brought significant change in historical analysis by including the role of culture in the writing of working class history. They introduced the ideas of “history from below” and the “role of agency”. The result was a great paradigm shift in western historiography. The Universalist metanarrative that claimed to discover objective truth was now challenged by *difference*, a multiplicity of voices from margins. In addition, the grand narrative of Marxism, along with the

category of class was superseded by culture. These developments, combined with the coming of Post-structuralism assisted the Subaltern Studies School to attempt a post-Eurocentric historiography. Butalia's historiography is a development in these lines. She brings in the subaltern voices: for the first time, nameless Partition survivors, women and dalits actively contribute to the writing of Indian history.

*The Other Side of Silence* appeared in such a context. The unique situation in the scene of Indian publishing and the growing need for indigenous women's writing as well as a new taste for sociological writing facilitated the birth of such a significant book.

*Borders & Boundaries* by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin shares a lot with *The Other Side of Silence* in their fields of study and methodology. What draws Butalia's project close to Subaltern Studies is not only her representation of the subaltern consciousness but also her use of family history/oral history/ *testimonio* (in Latin American Subaltern Studies) as a methodological stratagem to sneak in the subaltern as an associate and participant in academic research. Instead of trying to make up a pretension of objective representation, oral history allows the researcher and the subaltern the space where they can collaborate to create a narrative and also its supporting context. James E. Young thinks that oral history is "a matter of memory, reconstruction and imagination. Unlike written history that tends to hide its lines of construction, oral testimonies retain the process of construction, the activity of witness" (157). The 'facts' of an event are not the only important things in oral history. *How* the facts are remembered: emotions, the

nuances of speech as well as the silences, are equally important. And then, it helps her to put women back into history:

Oral history is a methodological tool that many feminist historians have found enormously empowering. Looking at women's narratives and testimonies, and placing them alongside, or indeed against, the official discourses of history, has offered feminist historians a new and different way of looking at history. (Young 21)

The suppression of women's history is only to be expected from a patriarchal order of things: apart from the trauma the atrocities inflicted, the memory of such incidents stigmatised the entire community. Therefore, the researcher has to listen carefully, to catch all the nuances: concentrate on not only what is being said but also what is left unsaid. The gaps in the speech eloquently suggest untold stories of women's suffering.

Butalia remarks

In order to be able to 'hear' women's voices, I had to begin to *pose different questions, to talk in different situations*, and to be prepared to do that most important of things, to *listen*: to their speech, their silences, the half-said things, the nuances. (126)

As Menon and Bhasin observe, the researcher needs to juxtapose the fieldwork with dominant and minor narratives: "[T]he material is presented in three voices: the

voice of the government, bureaucrats and members of parliament; the voices of women themselves; and lastly, those of the social workers to whom the work of rehabilitation and resettlement of recovered women was entrusted” (3). This would, as they rightly estimate, map the location of women in the contemporary discursive nexus. In *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur adopts a similar strategy as she represents women’s position within their communities in chapter XXVI, using a collage of views on Partition from the relatives of Virmati. The narrator’s uncles, Kailashnath and Gopinath, aunts Indumati and Sakuntala and Parvati aunt’s husband, as well as family friends Swarna Lata and Kanhiya Lal speak on the atrocities committed during Partition. Snippets from these interviews are juxtaposed with Nehru’s ‘tryst with destiny’ speech. It is interesting to note that not one of them spares a word for women. Only Parvati’s husband hints on the atrocities on women when he remarks, “...those, of course, we did our best to dissuade, as we did our best to suppress the stories of atrocities that insidiously burnt themselves into us” (251). The element of shame is evident here. The gaps in the speech eloquently suggest untold stories of women’s suffering. While Virmati’s male relatives speak mainly on political and economic issues, an inhibition to speak out compels them to remain silent on women’s sufferings. Women novelists’ depiction of Partition addresses those gaps and silences and representation emerges as a mighty project.

We know about the fates of thousands of women when Indumati and Swarna Lata start talking. Indumati speaks out from her religious position of a Hindu: “The Mussulmans chopped our people’s heads off, raped our women, cut off their breasts, all of which they claimed was in retaliation for what the Hindus were doing to them...” (250). Swarna Lata is an educated woman, a socialist. She can transcend the community narratives separating the attackers from the victims. Instead, she dwells on the fate of women and children, the most vulnerable victims of Partition, and the tearing up of their domestic lives: the deaths or estrangements of parents, husband, children and the humble family life which meant the world for them. All political, economic and religious considerations fade before the mightiness of the unspeakable violence that does not remain unspoken, after all.

#### *The Issue of Abducted Women and Children*

The story of Boota Singh who fell in love with the Muslim girl he rescued still lives in popular culture: the Bollywood blockbuster *Gadar-Ek Prem Katha* (2001) celebrated this romance. The real-life Boota Singh committed suicide when his married wife and children were taken away from him after the passing of *The Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act* (1949), an act that provided, on the basis of an agreement between the governments of India and Pakistan, the recovery and restoration of “abducted persons”, which meant

... a male child under the age of sixteen years or a female of whatever age who is, or immediately before the 1st day of March, 1947, was, a Muslim and who, on or after that day and before the 1st day of January, 1949, has become separated from his or her family and is found to be living with or under the control of any other individual or family, and in the latter case includes a child born to any such female after the said date. (web)

The act extended to the United Provinces, the Provinces of East Punjab and Delhi, the Patiala and East Punjab States Union and the United State of Rajasthan and remained in force up to 31st October 1951. Tribunals were set up on both sides of the border to consider complex cases and decide upon a verdict. Women social workers overwhelmingly participated in the programme, sending back many Muslim women abducted by Hindus and Sikhs to Pakistan.

Children, along with abducted women, suffered the most during Partition. If according to official records about 100,000 women were abducted, at least half of them became mothers. A similar number of children must have been estranged or lost their lives while escaping in large caravans. Nationalist history never mentioned their sufferings; no research projects were undertaken to discover what became of these helpless children.

The children born of abducted women emerged as a mighty problem for the religious communities after Partition. These “mixed”/ “hybrid” children were perceived as living signs of their community’s polluted *izzat*; they were fruits of foreign seeds that contaminated the pure genealogical flow of the community. Contemporary discourse on abducted women constantly uses the discourse of Sita’s abduction by Ravana, which could not pollute her, because the refusal of the women’s families to take her back in order to avoid social stigma was a real problem. Many of the abducted women refused to return to their previous homes, expecting this; and ashrams or special homes had to be opened for others. Most of the time the women were pregnant, they had no other option than to go through a purification rite called *safaya*: illegal abortion at the clinic of one doctor Kapoor. The government decided to ignore it. Problems arose when women have already become mothers. Though unwilling to let the baby go, they had to go to their families alone. They would not be accepted back into the fold if they brought with them a ‘hybrid’ child – it is a result of sexual domination of one community by another, and a constant reminder of that stigma.

In *Ice-Candy-Man*, the Recovered Women’s Camp on Waris Road is set up near the end of the novel. It assumes an important role, after Lenny’s grandmother sets “an entire conglomeration in motion” (274) to rescue Ayah from Hira Mandi and rehabilitate her. This points at the relentless work of social activists on either side of the border to restore women to their families. ‘It’ll take hours if she’s being registered,’ says

Hamida, the new maid who has replaced Ayah in the Sethi household. She recounts her experience with sympathy towards a fellow sufferer belonging to another religion, “They’ll be asking her a hundred-and-one questions, and filling out a hundred-and-one forms,” (273) referring to the clerks of the Ministry for the Rehabilitation of Recovered Women. Hamida was abducted by Sikhs or Hindus and later deserted by her husband and family. As the other community defiled her, she would not be allowed to see her children any more. Along with *izzat*, we now have another word frequently found in women survivors’ accounts: *kismet*. Loosely translated as “fate” it accompanies the unreason of *izzat*’s parochialism. Women who survived their ordeal in the hands of the enemy community are taken to task by their own people for their alleged submission. This discourse establishes itself, as Hamida blames none for the refusal of her family to take her in but her fate, her *kismet*.

‘If their father gets to know I’ve met them he will only get angry, and the children will suffer.’

‘I don’t like your husband,’ I say.

‘He’s a good man.’ Says Hamida, hiding her face bashfully in her chuddar.

‘It’s only my *kismet* that’s no good ... we are *khut-putli*, puppets, in the hands of fate.’ (ICM 222)

Sidhwa's interrogation of patriarchal discourses begins a gendered historiography that placed the silenced woman at the centre. Hamida's story is a truly representative one, as Sidhwa herself declares in an interview by Alok Bhalla:

... Hamida is a sort of composite figure. I suppose I drew upon all the stories of horror that were floating around me at that time. Horror was a part of the social conscious of the time. I heard about children being smashed against walls or boiled in oil, pregnant women being disembowelled. There was so much bestiality in those days." (2006: 233).

As Lenny frantically shouts for Ayah from her rooftop, the women in the camp's courtyard remember their homes and families, which have cast them off and loudly mourn their fate:

...our chant flows into the pulse of the women below, and the women on the roof, and they beat their breasts and cry: 'Hai! Hai! Hai! Hai!' reflecting the history of their cumulative sorrows and the sorrows of their Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Rajput great-grandmothers who burnt themselves alive rather than surrender their honour to the invading hordes besieging their ancestral fortresses. (*ICM* 273-274)

This passage is nothing short of a manifesto of the Indian Women's Movement that flourished with the establishment of the feminist press in the hands of Urvashi Butalia

and Ritu Menon in the mid-eighties. Sidhwa's poignant narrative interrogates parochial stereotypes of purity and fate that existed for centuries to deprive women of due space in their communities. Ayah's story, set against this dark background, is extraordinary in that it not only talks about her victimization and loss of voice, but also the retrieval of women's agency. Rodabai, Lenny's "godmother" first advises Ayah along the traditional line to accept her abductor as her husband. This was a practical option for many such abducted women, for their families would not accept them anyway. However, Ayah begs to get free from her situation, and utters one of the memorable lines in Partition literature:

‘What if your family won't take you back? She asks.

‘Whether they want me or not, I will go.’ (ICM 262)

With Rodabai's help, Ayah is finally able to break free from Ice-Candy-Man's sequined prison house and return to Amritsar in India.

*Imagined Communities, Women and Izzat: Partition, Honour Killings and Rape*

The first generation novels are remarkable for their depiction of gender-specific violence in its most fundamental form: abduction, mass rape, mutilation of internal and external reproductive organs, foeticide, killing, public humiliation, tattooing of women's bodies, and honour killing – annihilation drive from within the community. However, the depiction of the “madness” of Partition in gruesome details is replaced in the long

nineties with the consciousness that self-immolation and sacrifice of women were not “martyrdom” but violence – no different from the attacks coming from the enemy.

Violence now assumes meaning because of its affective and cultural content, where it is felt as meaningful (Nordstrom, 2004). An account of the cultural dimensions of violence is therefore even more important.

In the earlier chapters, we have already evoked Partha Chatterjee’s idea of the split psyche of the colonised Indians: they accept and imitate the ‘modern’ knowledge and western technologies; but do not really recreate a liberal-rationalist public/private division of spheres, assigning culture an unimportant place in the latter. Instead, this inner domain of culture becomes for him a sacred space where he is truly independent. As Partha Chatterjee says in his famous thesis, nationalism launches its “most powerful, creative, and historically significant project” through a focus on his untranslatable tradition to forge a ‘modern’ culture which conforms to and yet differs from western models. “If the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being,” Chatterjee concludes (1993:5) Therefore the glorification of motherland, mother tongue and virtuous women of the community. The response to colonial modernity, thus, was not an unqualified nationalism but multiple ethnic nationalisms in an uneasy aligning with secularism. During the time of ethnic conflicts the individual feels compelled to consider whether his personal actions, and especially those of his womenfolk, would ‘save’ or ‘pollute’ the honour of the community. In colonial Bengal,

there were the prevalent discourses of 'Sati' and 'Savitri'. In her book *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal* Indira Chowdhury refers to an interesting debate between Kedarnath Dutta and one Mr. Ward who made adverse comments on the Hindu woman's moral laxity. Dutta writes back to establish the 'chaste' image of the Hindu woman as *Sati* and *Savitri*. In *The Frail hero* Indira Chowdhury considers the implications of these gendered images such as the mother-land and mother-tongue inscribed in the discourses of the Nation:

... we need to locate the struggle to formulate *a stable self-image* at the site of a cultural and ideological encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. The official disparagement of Bengali male sexuality and its feminization within the construct of the 'effeminate' Bengali was part of the ideological equipment of the empire. As a reaction to the unrelenting British racism, the female figure came to signify purity. Framed by missionary and other dominant discourses, *the Hindu woman was not simply a part of a totality; she stood for the whole...* (Chowdhury 31)

Every community, which began its political career, felt the need to reconstruct an ideal image of their women. This was a time when women had to be summoned to strengthen communal allegiances and fully mobilize the communities. The discourse of 'izzat' is hyperactivated when politeness strategies fail, leading to violence as forms of Face

Threatening Acts. In absence of normal communication between communities, women are natural targets. Their bodies are empty spaces on which warring groups inscribe their signatures, as can be seen in Butalia's record of the appeal in the RSS narrative:

‘Tens of thousands of our pious mothers and sisters who would faint at the sight of blood were kidnapped and sold ... Their foreheads bore tattoo marks declaring them ‘Mohammad ki joru’, ‘Mian Ahmed ki joru’, ‘Haji Hussain ki joru’, etc, etc ... (186)

A woman was considered the property of a person as well as the *face* of a community (her *izzat* is equated with that of the community). She ensures free flow of patrilinearity – she is the medium through which a community expresses itself. Another man, even from within her own community, cannot have access to her sexuality. When seen from the angle of religious nationalism, the outsider's intervention is severely detested. The outsider pollutes the purity of the community, first by violating the woman, and then by “hybridizing” the next generation. Consequently, abducted women are never taken back inside the fold. Thus, acts of rape during normal times cannot be seen on a par with those committed during communal disturbances. Rape can be seen as a gender-specific assault, not on an individual but on a community (Stiglmeier 1994). It is used as a weapon against the other – to inflict a sense of deep shame and contamination on the *male* members of her community who feel their virility

challenged. The outsider pollutes the purity of the community and the religion, first by violating the woman, and then by hybridizing the next generation. Kamalaben Patel's Gujarati novel on Partition, *Mool Suta Ukhde*, published in *Manushi* (1988) – a women's journal, informs the reader that

Apart from rapes, other, specific kinds of violence had been visited on women. Many were paraded naked in the streets, several had their breasts cut off, their bodies tattooed with the marks of 'other' religion... (Butalia 100)

Thus, self-immolation was preferred to violation. Butalia quotes from a report in *The Statesman*:

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 the Punjab. They revived the Rajput tradition of self-immolation when their menfolk were no longer able to defend them. They also followed Mr. Gandhi's advice to Indian women that in certain circumstances, even suicide was morally preferable to submission. (196)

Survivor narratives punctured by gaps, omissions and careful silences eloquently suggest untold stories of women's suffering. Once threatened, the only solution the

patriarchy could see was the destruction of its womenfolk. This could be done either by decapitating them or convincing them that ‘death should be preferable to dishonour for good-good, sweet-sweet Sikh girls.’ (WBR 308) Thus the discourse of *izzat* ensured the women’s compliance: they were subjected to violence both from outside as well as from inside. Bir Bahadur Singh’s narrative in *The Other Side of Silence* revives such a grim sight:

In Gulab Singh’s haveli twenty-six girls had been put aside. First of all my father, Sant Raja Singh, when he brought his daughter, he brought her into the courtyard to kill her, first of all he prayed, he did ardaas, saying sacche badshah, we have not allowed your Sikhi to get stained, and in order to save it we are going to sacrifice our daughters, make them martyrs. Please forgive us. (206)

The community violence at Thoa Khalsa and the self-immolation of women are ‘honourable’ ways out of the disgraceful lot of falling into the hands of Muslims and losing ‘*izzat*’: in the case of men, it was a disgraceful affair of losing one’s foreskin and professed religion; and for women it was sexual assault and slavery. In Thoa Khalsa, men wanted to be martyred for their own reasons. An old man retorted, “Do you think I will allow the Musalmaans to cut this beard of mine and take me to Lahore as a sheikh?” (206)

The narrator presents an awe-inspiring scene of a daughter removing her plait when it came between her life and her father's sword, thus facilitating the decapitation. The stress is always on the fearlessness of the victims who value their 'izzat' more than their lives. These are not stories of victimhood but martyrdom, celebrating the dignity/virility of the religious community in the face of death. As Butalia notes, these are 'examples of the heroism of the Sikh women who 'gave up' their lives 'willingly' for the sake of their religion' (209). The Sikh male (that is to say, people strong enough to undertake the hardship of a long journey to India) thought of this as a sacred duty towards his God and his religious community. Bir Bahadur Singh adopted such a strategy to save the 'izzat' of his community. Numberless women were killed by their own family members; so, their deaths were not reported to the police. At the same time, while the memories of abducted women were erased, these "heroic" women became celebrated martyrs.

Baldwin has interrogated this patriarchal discourse towards the end of *What the Body Remembers*. Roop's sister-in-law Kusum was twice 'murdered' – beheaded by her father-in-law and later disembowelled by Muslims. When the Muslims of *Pari Darvaja* attacked their *haveli*, Bachan Singh thought

'But Kusum, she was my responsibility ... I said to myself: Kusum was entrusted to me by Jeevan, she is young, *still of childbearing age*. I cannot

endure even the possibility that some Muslim might put his hands upon her. Every day I had been hearing that the *seeds of that foreign religion* were being planted in Sikh woman's wombs. No, I said: I must do my duty.' (WBR 520)

If Bachan Singh thought of this murder as a severe but sacred duty, so did Kusum. Obliging, she stood waiting for the *kirpan* to hit her neck. When Bachan Singh became emotionally weak and could not strike too hard, Kusum removed her *chunni* from her neck so that her decapitation was done effortlessly. Kusum was not given (and she did not give herself) a chance to escape from the Muslims. Her father-in-law lived to tell her story. When Muslims found her corpse inside the empty house, they took out her womb. Her husband Jeevan interprets this as a message from the other:

And the message, 'We will stamp out your kind, your very species from existence ... this is a war against your *quom*, for all time. Leave. We take the womb, so there can be no Sikhs from it. We take the womb; leave you its shell.' (WBR 511)

The womb emerges as a mighty symbol here: it is the vital organ ensuring the genealogical flow of a community, and the woman is a mere "shell" (511). Naturally, Rape becomes a weapon that can be used against a community which views the womb as its property. The Other can be *shamed* if foreign seeds could be planted in the womb,

thus polluting it and mongrelizing the offspring. The act of taking away the womb signifies a celebration of the successful stopping of a community's genealogical flow.

In Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*, the train from Gurdaspur enters Lahore station, carrying hundreds of corpses. There are no women in the carriage but only two gunny bags full of women's breasts. This clearly is a message from one community to another, to which the train acts as the courier. This symbolic act would translate into defiant statement of being able to block the stream of nourishment for the enemy's offspring, and thus the genealogical flow of the other community. Meanwhile, women are accorded the status of 'shells' of wombs. The ice-candy man confesses that

...I lose my senses when I think of the mutilated bodies on the train from Gurdaspur...that night I went mad...I lobbed grenades through the windows of Hindus and Sikhs I've known all my life!...I want to kill someone for each one of the breasts, they cut off the Muslim women...

(*ICM* 156)

Lenny's ayah is abducted by ice-candy man and his cronies, and her fiancé found murdered. She becomes a token – a Hindu who is to be violated, even by men whom she counted among her friends. When Lenny and her godmother save her from Hira Mandi, Lahore's red-light area, she has lost her voice. This silence symbolises trauma inflicted on women by the patriarchal order, not any particular community.

Alexandra Stiglmayer (1994), Susan Brownmiller (1975), and Catherine A. MacKinnon (1989) are some of the leading researchers who comment on mass rape as a weapon of war. During war, female bodies have been strategically subjected to humiliation and mutilation to shame and mortify the men of the other communities, challenging their virility. Recent technological progress has worsened the crisis by turning rape into pornography – there are very recent examples from the Indian subcontinent of videographing mass rapes of women belonging to other communities, editing them to create conventional pornographic tropes, and distributing them digitally. The responsibility, Feminists assert, finally rests not on an individual or a community but culture, which perpetuates patriarchal norms through signifying practices. After witnessing the horrors of Partition, Baldwin's protagonist feels the need to perform a subversive bodily act to communicate to her fellow men the existence of a pre-cultural truth:

*So much shame, so little izzat for girls and women.*

Roop's very bones feel old, so old.

She can bear it no more, blood simmers to boil in her veins.

If Satya were here, she would shout from the top platform till everyone might hear – every man, woman, and child should, just once in their lifetime, see a woman's body without shame. See her as no man's possession, see her, and not from the corners of your eyes! ... she wants

to scream, *See me, I am human, though I am only a woman ... See me not as a vessel, a plaything, a fantasy, a maidservant, an ornament, but as Vaheguru made me.* (WBR 498, emphasis original)

Roop becomes a madwoman by publicly discarding her veil, stripping herself and shouting in agony till all eyes are on her. However, culture soon reclaims her body as a sepoy covers her with his khaki shirt and leads her away to the women's waiting lounge.

Evidently, authors such as Chaman Nahal, Manohar Malgonkar and Khushwant Singh, even the women novelists Mumtaz Shah Nawaz and Attia Hosain stand inside the Nehruvian liberal-secular discursive domain, exhibiting a politics that is much different from that of Bapsi Sidhwa, Shauna Singh Baldwin and Manju Kapur who write after the paradigm shift of the long nineties. While the former group's representational politics is implicated in the colonial narrative of community and its parochial standards, the post-nineties authors interrogate the position of women in their communities, and attempt a gendered historiography of Partition. Perhaps the only factor that unites all the women novelists along the timeline is a pervasive awareness of their status as second-class citizens who are sometimes allowed to watch the pageants of national politics from their small windows.