

## Encountering ‘Identity’: Refugee Women and the Partition of the Subcontinent

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### Introduction

India’s Independence after almost 200 years of colonisation was accompanied by the tragic Partition of the country for which the common masses in general and those on the western and eastern borders, in particular, had to pay a very heavy price. The horrific events that both preceded as well as followed the Partition saw people losing their homes and their identities changed. They had to come to terms with their new refugee identity. In her book, *The Great Partition*, Yasmin Khan (2007, 128) argues that Partition ‘stands testament to the follies of empire, which ruptures community evolution, distorts historical trajectories, and forces violent state formation from societies that would otherwise have taken different—and unknowable—paths.’

The new governments on both sides of the border (India and Pakistan) could not anticipate the fear and uncertainty that Partition led to, in terms of the deepening of communal hatred, the legacy of which continues till date. The mass exodus of people following the independence of the Indian subcontinent had no defined destination. Instead, their journey to exile and homelessness was unsafe, dangerous, defenceless, insecure, and hazardous. It was one of the largest and most precipitous forced migrations in human history, followed by violence, dislocation, survival and rehabilitation. As soon as Partition was declared, people on both sides of the border hoped that they would not have to leave their homelands and that they would remain on the right side of the border. However, for many, this turned out to be a dream. Not just leaving their homes behind but the fact that they would never be able to return to their roots became a nightmare for many of them.

Close to 16.7 million people were displaced during a couple of years post-Partition (Bose, 2006; Bharadwaj et al. 2008). Out of which 14.5 million were documented, the remaining 2.2

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million people went ‘missing’, especially along the western part of the Indian border. Thousands of women, estimates ranging from 25,000 to 29,000 Hindu and Sikh women and 12,000 to 15,000 Muslim women, were abducted, raped, forced into marriage, forced to convert, and killed on both sides of the border (Roy, 2012). Women became the face of all sorts of unimaginable atrocities and violence. Partition changed women’s lives overnight as they became the battleground for men of different religious faiths and, in some instances, for men of their own religious community. Recent work on Partition has tried to capture the voices of the ‘human side’ of Partition using oral-testimonies. It provided what Butalia (1998) calls a ‘human dimension’ to the event. Besides, the need to read the ‘other’s’ story has been felt, to look at their silences.

While both Bengal and Punjab suffered due to the Partition, the latter suffered the most as a much greater number of people crossed the newly created border on both sides of it. The partition of Punjab resulted in 16 districts, 55 per cent of the population and 62 per cent of the geographical area of undivided Punjab allotted to West Pakistan and 13 districts and the rest of the population and areas remaining in India (Kaur 2010, 4).

This paper investigates how the notions of ‘home’ and ‘identity’ changed for refugee women post-Independence in India on the western side of the border. It provides a detailed picture of the lived experiences of refugee women in the available historiography on Partition, exploring how their identity constantly got (re)shaped post-partition alongside the formation of the nation-state. At the same time, the paper focuses on how memory has played a crucial role in defining their identities. In the context of a gendered story of Partition, which uses narratives of women’s experience, this paper also enquires into the question of ‘home’ – what it meant for refugee women and how memory played a crucial role in determining the same.

### **Defining the ‘Refugees’**

Partition created a ‘category of persons’ whose identity became affixed through official documentation on both sides of the border (Callamard, 2002). This characterisation of refugees in India has been a ‘critical component of nation-building’ (Menon 2003, 155). Initially, the state identified them as ‘displaced persons’, ‘migrants’ or ‘evacuees’ in the 1940s and 1950s (ibid.). In due course of time, things started taking a different shape with the rise in communal hatred excavating the religious identity of the concerned person, being identified as the ‘other’ as against the religious majority group. Gradually, their identity took a new shape, with the heightening of communal hatred and soon they were categorised as ‘Muslim’ and ‘non-Muslim’ refugees, accenting their religious identity (Zamindar 2008, 9).

The migrants were variously defined as ‘refugees’, ‘aliens’, ‘infiltrators’, ‘foreigners’. However, while addressing the issue of refugees, the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation

always used the term 'displaced persons.' One of the earliest instances of using the term displaced persons occurs in the Resettlement of Displaced Persons (Land Acquisition) Ordinance in 1948.<sup>1</sup> Here a displaced person was defined as:

... any person who, on account of the setting up of the Dominion of India and Pakistan, or on account of civil disturbances, or the fear of such disturbances in any area now forming part of Pakistan, has been displaced from or has left his place of residence in such area after the first day of March 1947, and who has subsequently been residing in India.

This definition was further modified in one of the most important Acts of Parliament for the benefit of the displaced person – The Displaced Persons (Claims) Act (1950) – in the following manner:

... any person who, on account of the setting up of the Dominion of India and Pakistan, or on account of civil disturbances, or the fear of such disturbances in any area now forming part of Pakistan, has after the first day of March, 1947, left or been displaced from, his place of residence in such area and who has been subsequently residing in India, and includes any person who is resident in India and who for that reason is unable or has been made unable to manage, supervise or control any immovable property belonging to him in Pakistan.

The very construction of identity is a complex and multi-layered one. The refugees were not a monolithic group. They carried their pre-existing identities based on caste, class, gender, and ethnicity, which added to their vulnerable position. Despite that, much like the displaced persons on the eastern border coming to India, who preferred to be called 'udbastu' (uprooted) or 'bastuhara' (one who has lost home), the displaced persons coming from West Pakistan did not consider themselves to be objects of charity. Instead, they preferred themselves to be called *purushartha* in place of *sharanartha*, glorifying the aspect of self-reliance in them (Ghosal 2014, 553). Thus, the very construction of their identity as 'refugee' or 'displaced person' as the 'other' being excluded from the laws of citizens, to use Agamben (2000), gave them a naked or 'bare life' that was completely different from their life before Partition.

### Refugee Women

Women and their miseries occupy a seminal position in the literature of Partition. They have always been viewed as inferior to their male counterpart. Portrayed as mere objects of desire and pity, women in partition literature have appeared as 'marginal, secondary, and in their affiliations to male as mothers, wives, sisters, or mistress and rarely they have been viewed as independent agents' (Sharma 2019). Women's absence as subjects of history is

due to the fact that ‘they are presumed to be outside history because they are outside the public and the political, where history is made. Consequently, they have no part in it’ (Menon 2017, 3).

For a long time, women’s voices did not find space within the literature produced on refugees across the globe, also evident in Indian Partition historiography, as they remained ‘outside’ the discourse on Partition. The discourse on refugees started becoming more inclusive in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While surveying the literature on refugee women in the 1980s, Moussa’s work marked a paradigm shift. Through her famous work titled ‘Women Refugee – Footnote or Text?’, Moussa (1993) highlighted how women were left at the margins and how the experience of men found a place at the centre stage in refugee historiography.

Around the same time, the complete absence of women voices from Partition literature was being challenged as the available writings were the official histories produced by the respective governments on either side of the border. It was Menon and Bhasin’s article in *Economic and Political Weekly* in the year 1993 that women for the first time found a place in partition historiography (Menon and Bhasin 1993). Subsequent to this, Menon’s *Borders and Boundaries* (1998) and Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) resulted in a paradigm shift in the existing literature on the subject. Gradually, literature started acknowledging the issue of gendered violence in the communal riots during Partition. Until then, the role of women during this watershed moment in South Asian history was silenced. Dey (2018) states that it would be untrue to claim that women are entirely absent from Partition history. However, we only see them in history books as numbers and as ‘objects of study, rather than as subjects’ (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 11). In the Indian subcontinent, women’s histories, literature, and testimonies divulge exactly what official partition history chooses to ignore. Their narratives reveal how they were ruthlessly used as silent, dehumanised tools amidst the patriarchal power play between two religious groups.

For women, Independence remained an ‘abstract’ thing (Pandey 2001, 125), as they had to work out ‘new strategies of survival in a completely alien land’ (Bhardwaj 2004, 73). They suffered violence and abuse that became part of their everyday experience. Not that displacement treated men in any different way, but the gender identity of women added to their vulnerability, making them the face of victimhood. They remained at the centre of vulnerability, whether it was taking refuge in the other country, their plight in their own country, or their repatriation or resettlement (Mehdi 2020, Hans 1999). Losing their nationality, nation, identity and, for some, their family members had torn them apart, leading to the gradual erosion of their agency, what Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al. (2009) calls ‘de-selving’ in the context of refugee women across the globe.

## Identity and Refugee Women

Partition changed the identity of those crossing the border from 'being' a citizen to 'becoming' a refugee, from having a home to becoming homeless and for some stateless, that challenged the 'national order of things' (Malkki 1995). Refugees had no choice but to depend on the benevolence of the state to reconstruct dignified living.<sup>2</sup> They had to constantly negotiate and (re)define their identity in the years succeeding Partition, especially their religious identity. They tried making their own identity in the host location by imposing some 'essences on their own culture' (Ghoshal and Aparajita 2015, 652). The identity of a refugee woman got suppressed within the larger 'identity of refugees' (Ghoshal 2021).

In nationalist imagination, the nation is seen as a feminine entity. This gendering of nation legitimises the idea that nation as mother/woman needs to be protected by its (male) citizens from evil outsiders, thereby sanctioning communal wars (Dey 2018). For instance, the discourse of women's chastity was deployed to counter issues of foreign domination during the Swadeshi period to become the embodiment of the nation.<sup>3</sup> Historically, the Indian state was identified as *Bharat-Mata* (Mother India), and the role of the men was to protect the honour of their mother – implied in terms of protecting 'their' women from the alien.

Deniz Kandiyoti (1991, 429) in her essay *Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation* states that

[w]omen bear the burden of being 'mother of the nation' . . . as well as being those who reproduce the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, who transmit the culture and who are the privileged signifiers of national difference.

No wonder when a nation negotiates with violence, these gendered bodies become the specific sites of that violence.<sup>4</sup> Butalia (1994) cites a pamphlet by an activist group called Women Against Fundamentalism. The pamphlet not only succinctly locates women within the framework of partition violence but also raises a strong voice against forcefully assigning roles to women as bearers of 'national integrity and unity.'

Women faced violence not just from the men of the rival community but also from their own people post-recovery. Many families were unwilling to take back their women as it would bring shame to them and the community. Alok Bhalla (2006), for instance, states that 'victories are celebrated on the bodies of women...When women are attacked, it is not they *per se* who are targets but the men to whom they belong'. Women were abducted and raped on both sides of the border. Menon and Bhasin (1998, 70) claim that the official number of abducted women stood at 50,000 for Muslim women kidnapped by Hindu and Sikh men on their way to Pakistan, while 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women were abducted as they attempted to migrate to India. Butalia (1998, 3) gives similar numbers; she claims that a total of 75,000

women were abducted from both sides of the border. It is also very likely that the actual numbers might be a lot higher than the official estimate found in books and archives (Dey 2016).

‘Dishonouring’ and humiliating the women of the ‘Other’ religious community became the order of the day. Many of these women jumped into wells in groups to save themselves and their families honour. One such heart shaking incident has been the self-killing of 96 women of Thoa Khalsa (Dey 2016). Furthermore, in order to grasp the magnitude of violence against women, one must begin with looking at available facts and numbers.

In some instances, women did not speak up at all, as they feared that by sharing their experiences, they might bring ‘shame’ to the family and, therefore, to their community. In Butalia’s experience, ‘women almost never spoke about themselves, indeed they denied they had anything ‘worthwhile’ to say, a stance that was often corroborated by their men...or they simply weren’t able to speak’ (Butalia 1998, 126). Each story revolving around the event has emphasised the silence of women. Zamindar (2008) rightly calls the stories of women survivors the ‘drone of silences’, symbolising the ‘unbearable grief’. In Manto’s *Khol Do*, the female character, Sakina, remains silent throughout the story and is unconscious when her father finds her. When the doctor asks her father to ‘open it’, referring to the window behind, Sakina, being abused to hell, assumes that she has been asked to open her clothes, and silently her hands go down to remove her *salwar* and open her legs. Being violated so many times, her silence also reflects resignation – that no longer is she in a position to protest. Similarly, women who chose to kill themselves rather than being raped echoed a different kind of silence – the silence of protecting themselves, silence on the part of the state who failed its women.

It comes from the very structure of the patriarchal society where women are always expected to govern their tongues. For these women, remaining silent meant revealing less of their identity. Also, it meant acceptability as it spawned a ray of hope for these women that they might get re-integrated in their new spaces. On many occasions, women used a third party reference to tell their own stories using ‘language that was general and metamorphic’, which helped them achieve agency (Das 1996).

The state’s role had also been crucial in strengthening these silences. In many cases, it forced women to hide the ‘evidence’ that they had been sexually assaulted by their abductors so that they could ‘return’ to their families even if they did not want to. Each story emphasises the silence of women, conveying the fragmentation of community, of their family and most importantly, their own identity.

It was not just the women that were silenced but also the minority communities. The deep inequalities of class and caste have moulded the identity of refugees across borders.

Interviewing women from both sides of the western border, Virdee (2013) identifies a commonality of how women belonging to different class groups identified their stories and how they articulated their opinion about Partition. He observed that lower caste and illiterate women did not value their own voices compared to women of the middle class who still (if at all) were able to voice out. It was because of the way the former group of women perceived themselves to be – as unimportant and, therefore, their voice or opinion would hardly matter to anyone.

All forms of violence inflicted on women, be it by the members of the 'other' community or their own, proved that women were not treated as humans.<sup>5</sup> Rather they were seen as markers of communal and national pride. These violent acts faced by women served as a metaphor that was 'an indicator of the place that women's sexuality occupie[d] in an all-male, patriarchal arrangement of gender relations, between and within religious or ethnic communities' (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 41). Contextualising the relevance of the female body in communal conflict, Jisha Menon (2013, 121) explains the relevance of the female body in communal conflict. She argues, 'The female body served as the terrain through which to exchange dramatic acts of violence. The gendered violence of the Partition thus positioned women between symbolic abstraction and embodiment.' ). For Menon and Bhasin (1998, 41), these acts 'desexualise a woman and negate her as wife and mother; no longer a nurturer'.

Every violent act served as a metaphor that was 'an indicator of the place that women's sexuality occupie[d] in an all-male, patriarchal arrangement of gender relations, between and within religious or ethnic communities' (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 41). The acts of violence, of mutilation and rape, on women's bodies were as though an action violence to the religious group that they belonged and a women's body became a site of brandishing the male supremacy of the other religion (Bhalla, 2006, 233).

They were unable to rejoice the Independence; their life was at stake as it was a question of survival. As Pandey (2001, 125) puts it more aptly – 'Partition changed the course of many lives which would have otherwise run in their familial channels. It was in the bloodletting of Partition that the meaning of Independence was to be found by many ordinary people'. Also, it (re)shaped the everyday experiences of people not only belonging to that era but also for generations to come. Recalling the event of Partition, Tan and Kudaisya (2000, 7) rightly mention it as 'apocalyptic'.

In the wake of Partition, violence was perpetrated against women by their own kith and kin, euphemistically known as 'honour killings'. This was justified as a pre-emptive action to preserve the modesty of the women. Menon and Bhasin (1998, 44) note that 'so powerful and general was the belief that safeguarding a woman's honour is essential to upholding male and community honour that a whole new order of violence came into play, by men

against their own kinswomen; and by women against their daughters or sisters and their own selves'. Unfortunately, the recovery programme that the government organised excavated the problems of these women. As Menon and Bhasin argue, this recovery of women was the vindication of the honour of the emasculated nation as it was implemented to reconcile the state's duty towards its citizens. Perhaps the state believed it was helping these women and improving their welfare, as the state saw itself as a 'humanitarian actor' (Butalia 1998). A resolution was passed by the Indian Constituent Assembly asserting that "people should be given every opportunity to return to their homes and the life of their choice', but women 'must be restored to their homes'" (Didur 2000). The resolution spoke about the idea of 'choice', but for these women, choices were reduced to what the government and their families wanted for them. This state programme posed another kind of challenge to the newly established (if at all) identity of these women. Their rights as full-fledged citizens in their new 'home' were again forfeited by the patriarchal state aiming to protect the purity and chastity of the 'legitimate' family and religious community. The government faced severe criticism with respect to its recovery and rehabilitation programmes. Such programmes added to the vulnerability of women who somehow managed to settle down after being uprooted. For many, their family members refused to recognise them, resulting in 13,133 unattached women and children on the Indian side, who were provided shelter at 30 different homes (Sengupta 2012).

### **The Notion of 'Home'**

Refugees are defined by the loss of home. They are forced to leave their home, which has been the 'physical manifestation of their identity' for ages (Natalia 2011). With the creation of newly defined territories emerged a new dichotomy – 'here' and 'there' – within the refugee discourses. The dilemma that these people were left with was which one to call 'home' – the one left behind or the one where settling down was a major challenge and uncertain too. The forced choice between the two reinforced the notion of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' – those who belonged to the nation and those who crossed borders.

For the refugee women, the challenge was of a dual nature – first, creating their 'own spaces' within the constricted space and, second, negotiating within the refugee community and the society at large. The 'new' identity associated with refugee women determined their position within the host location, where they became disempowered and were exposed to more vulnerable circumstances. With the formation of the nation-state, there was a continuous change in the role of women with regard to their contribution in the 'public' sphere, which was again limited in terms of both time and space. The state successfully moulded and reshaped women's roles whenever required and also drew a line limiting their movements within the 'public' sphere which ultimately led to their absence from the same.



The idea of 'home' in particular was very central to the women of that era. The fact that women identified themselves with the 'private' space was challenged overnight. Rejection by family and the feeling of being homeless impelled many women to 'come out' in the public sphere. However, in no way Partition is to be understood as a 'liberating event for women' (Sharma 2019). While two new countries gained freedom from their colonial yoke, the women who were displaced across the borders were ironically not free to go back to their homes.

Women in some families had to give up on their aspirations and desires, while in some others, they remained 'forgotten' (Butalia 1998, 112). In some cases, women longed of returning to their homes. But as Kavita Punjabi (2015) argues, how does one make sense of the 'homeland' which might no longer exist for these women? Writing about the partition experience of north India, Gyanendra Pandey (2001, 165) writes about the misogynist north Indian proverb, '*beeran ki kai jaat*' ('what caste [or nationality] can a woman have?') – for she 'belongs' to someone else, and therefore to his caste, nationality and religion'. On similar lines, Menon (2017) also asks a critical question – Do women have a country? They neither belonged to the place once they were a part of nor considered a part of the new space where she arrived. Home became a distant dream, and rehabilitation had to be fought for. Therefore, the refugee women belonged 'neither here nor there' (Raheja 2018). Most importantly, the loss of friendship was arguably even more painful and unbearable than the loss of home. Neighbours became enemies within a night. The protagonist in this process was fear, as people started migrating and leaving their homes because they were afraid of the future (Chatterji 2007).

### Memory

Memory has played a crucial role in the life of a displaced person, as things get 'reshaped by their afterthoughts, additions, and erasures' (Bhalla 2002). It remains a key issue in the way partition survivors remember their past. Though Butalia (1998) suggests that working with memory has its own problems, that 'it is never simple', as memory does not exist in a vacuum, and that the act of remembering and retelling can be manipulated. As Dosse and Goldenstein (in Lacroix and Fiddian-Qamiyeh 2013) state, 'memory narratives stand between forgetting and imagination'.

However, the identity of the refugee women in the newly located spaces is largely constructed by memory. As appropriately pointed out by Amitav Ghosh (1988, 190), millions were left 'with no home but in memory'. Post-partition, memory became a means by which women chose to remember Partition; their lived experience, stories that revolved around this historic and horrific event. The process of remembering, forgetting, and memorialising is often political in nature. For the refugee woman, it determined her position within her family, her community, and at large within the newly formed nation-state. In fact, 'memory only becomes interesting through its struggle with forgetfulness' (Forty and Kuchler 1999).

A review of the partition literature highlights a vital understanding of two different kinds of memory – the individual and the collective memory. Individual memory is shaped by individual experiences, interpersonal relationships, a sense of responsibility and the way in which these women identified themselves within the newly constructed spaces. On the other hand, collective memory gets construed with the emergence of distinct political identities in society by ‘redrawing the boundaries of sameness and otherness’ (Lacroix and Fiddian-Qamiyeh 2013). It delineates the ‘when’ (denoting the time frame), ‘who’ (religious identity of the person) and ‘where’ (place of settlement) of the person(s) concerned. In partition writings, a collective shared experience and representation of traumatic conditions regulated the relationship between ‘us’ and ‘them’, thereby distinguishing those who can refer to the common past of becoming a refugee and those who cannot.

The creation of memory has also been circulated across generations. However, there certainly exist disparities in the way different generations remember Partition. Whereas the first generation of women experienced the horrific event of Partition, the subsequent generations claim to remember their past. While the first generation of people thought it to be temporary, the second and third considered Partition to be a *‘fait accompli’*, illustrating how memory is tied to strategic ignorance (Raj 2000). In short, memory is not simply handed down in a timeless form from generation to generation but bears the impression or stamp of its own time and culture. Such memories, such silences have not only shaped the identity and life journey of those who survived violence but also of the future generations and, at large, one’s understanding of pre and post-partition.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the identity of a refugee woman is the one that takes a battering both during and post displacement. The act of being uprooted is sadly followed by violence on their bodies, the traumatic impact of which stays on their minds, which, in said irony, cannot be partitioned away. Their physical and mental scars would need a voice, even if it meant the revival of pain. As Kaur et al. (2017) poignantly state, ‘The generation that was a witness to the carnage is dying along with their painful memories. We owe it to them to preserve their memories for future generations.’ What is needed today in academic research is a cognitive shift in acknowledging the legitimacy of the discourse, by and about refugees, especially the women, towards their own memories.

It is imperative that research also adopts an intersectionality approach to accept that gender, psycho-social health, and politics intersect to look at refugee women with the combined lens of the feminist, trauma, and post-colonial analyses. Besides, the idea of the home need not resonate with the ideology of nationalism, the territoriality of homeland, or the spatial geography of a structural place of dwelling. It is critical for research to reflect on the link between home and memory, on ways of thinking about home to expand the impact of any research with

refugees, within the framework of the dual aspects of memory – one of trauma and other of nostalgia. For refugees, the Partition of 1947 on both the Indian and Pakistani sides was not a fleeting encounter but one that left memories for generations to negotiate their current lives with their personal narratives of displacement. The power of narrative in remembering the past, to ground the present and negotiate the future must not be underestimated.

## Notes

1. This was applicable to the region of Delhi and on similar lines, another Act – East Punjab Refugees Rehabilitation Act, 1948 – was passed for the region of Punjab.
2. S. P. Mookerjee Papers, II-IV instalments, Subject file No. 160, p. 3, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.
3. The Swadeshi movement became the starting point for discourse on women which laid the foundation for the Partition narratives. The spiritual-material binary corresponding to the home and the world took deep root, projecting women as the custodian of the inner, the home, the '*bhadramahila*,' who became the repository of 'essential marks of cultural identity.' (Chatterjee, 1993, 117).
4. These women were treated as objects through which a community's idea of purity and pride was orchestrated by controlling their sexuality and bodies. Hence, the aspect of violence against women during partition not only highlights gender differences in the Indian Subcontinent but can also be seen as one of the primary examples that deconstructs Jameson's notion that Third World experiences can all be categorised as one. In fact, even today, the lives of women in South Asia still continue to unfold in a manner very different to those of South Asian men. (Dey, 2016)
5. This ethnic genocide witnessed two kinds of gender-based violence. Firstly, the violence inflicted on women by men of the opposite religious group involved kidnapping, rape, and mutilation of the genitalia or public humiliation. The supposed aim of this kind of violence was to abase the men of the rival religion to which the women belonged. The second form of violence against women included the violence inflicted on women by their own family members. This could vary from honour killings to the insistence of male kin that their mothers, daughters, or wives commit suicide in order to safeguard the purity and chastity of the community. Both forms of violence substantiate the claim that women were not treated as humans but rather as markers of communal and national pride. See Dey, 2016.

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