

Traces of Absence: The Politics and Politicisation of Gender Violence through Partition Narratives and Present Day Media Reports

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Abstract

The paper attempts to discuss the politics of gender violence by interrogating the hegemonic processes of subject construction and the dominant discourses of narration which frame victimhood in selected Partition narratives with a special focus on Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* and *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* edited by Jashodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta. It further traces the development of the same issues with respect to an emerging media culture which tends to politicise gender violence in accounts of crimes against women. The paper also reflects upon the sub national conflicts between communal groups, ethnicities and ideological affiliations which emerge through the discussion of gender violence. Particularly, it will focus on the subjective experience of victimhood as a category that facilitates the understanding of micro-histories and testimonies within the discursive practises of representation and production of identity.

Key Words: *Gender, Violence, Nation-Building, Partition, History, Media, Representation, Politics*

The Partition of India (1947) cannot be read as a solitary, historical phenomenon, it must be treated as part of a continuum: a consequence of the hard won Independence, a culmination of simmering communal tensions and a political necessity. Memory acts as the tormented margin bordering the centrality of creative texts written during 1947 and in the aftermath of the Partition. In fiction, the production of the narrative has been involved with the process of fragmentation, dissociation and loss, where the subject enters into a dialogue with the existing framework of social history. In the 1990's, feminist scholars who revisited Partition stories and attempted an oral-history research, re-examined key issues raised by fictional accounts and official narratives of 1947 and challenged the exclusion of the real experiences of women and subaltern groups.

They argued that although there has been a pervasive veneration of the nation as female (the popular iconography of the nation as a mother), however a critical re-examination of the

official history reveals the systematic ways in which the new nation state and social agencies have silenced the experiences of conflict of women. There is a deliberate absence of the traces of trauma and victimhood undergone by women because a culture of denial and shame shrouds gender violence and rape. A casual reader of history quickly learns that rape remains unmentionable, even in war. Serious historians have rarely bothered to document specific acts of gender violence during conflict, for reasons of their own scale of values and taste as well as lack of substantial proof. There has been consequently a serious gap or omission of the experiences of women in hegemonic state narratives.

Through a micro-historical analysis of the Partition of India it may be observed that dominant histories of state-centric conflicts are frequently stories recounted by the state and its elites. The patriarchal state omitted the lived experiences of women (and others), and in writing the grand narrative of nation formation used teleological approaches to construct a homogeneous, codified national identity. Civilians who experienced aggression were blended into the background, thus becoming little more than a part of the traumatized landscape. (This condition also happens to prevail in the present state of Kashmir after the revocation of Article 370, where testimonies of civilians who are under rigorous state surveillance and severely restricted in their right to freedom have been largely marginalized as opposed to state-sponsored accounts that are frequently communicated through the media).

In many cases, their narratives have been appropriated by the state, which in turn gains elements of legitimacy by telling these stories on behalf of the victims. By failing to document, analyze and address the experiences of those who suffered direct violence during the Partition, the state often failed to resolve violence in a post-conflict society and provide adequate reparation. Instead the state maintained an uneasy, volatile, brittle peace as is evident in the period immediately following the Partition when sporadic communal conflicts which flared in the borderlands often targeted women. However, this process of nation building was rendered far more problematic when memories of the Partition and sexual violence were suppressed for the purposes of the state's imagined purity. The tendency to feminize the nation and render it inviolable, reinforced the idea of a natural delineation in terms of what was exclusively private, untainted by aggression or 'outsiders.' The shared culture of secrecy and shame which

surrounded narratives of sexual violence may therefore be understood as pertinent in the context of the state.

The politics of rape emerges through the systematic ways in which majority groups and the nation construct femininity and identify with normative male narratives about significant historical periods or events. It is important to focus on the difficult relationship between gender and the nationalist project which emerges in this context. The nation, in the current postmodernist onslaught, operates as a meta-narrative in which the entire hegemonic establishment is implicated. Assessing instances of gender violence from a feminist perspective one cannot help noticing the deep collusion between the community at one end of the spectrum and the nation on the other. Ironically, the emphasis on women and their sexuality has inevitably occurred within predominant structures and epistemologies of the state and community. Moral regulation and a hypocritical obsession with women's sexual purity mark the patriarchal foundation of the hegemonic class in India. In the tumultuous history of Partition, the women were to be carefully protected almost in lieu of the property over which claim was often forcefully forfeited. The issue of power was implicit within the act of preservation and violation since the woman's body was deemed as a communal marker. The anxiety was shared by both communities as this was the historical juncture when two nations were born out of one nationalist struggle. The nation-community nexus was significant in the context of the Partition. The politics of rape emerges in the assumption that a woman's body may be used as a pawn in the task of nation building. Urvashi Butalia in her seminal work, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* argues that the idea of women as property - of families, communities, men-underlay the ways in which women were so routinely violated during Partition, under the guise of protection, honour and purity. The territoriality over the body invoked compulsions of ritual purity associated with the woman who occupied the pure domains of hearth and marriage. Gender norms are determined by the force of religious law and perpetuated through social practices which define the female body as sacred and chastity as virtuous in Eastern cultures. This association however positive may be regarded as a veiled attempt at maintaining status quo and preserving the patriarchal power balance. It also provides a

convenient basis for understanding gender crimes: the use of rape in Partition as a form of communal violence which inflicted both personal and collective social disgrace.

Systematic rape during the Partition demonstrated a community's failure to protect its women and the erasure of these painful memories was considered desirable not only for the woman but also for the recovery of the community. Partha Chatterjee presents 'community' and 'women' as two fragments of the nation. In his book, *Nation and Its Fragments* (1992), Chatterjee explains that at the moment of the birth of two nation-states from one colonial state, the bodies of numerous women were brought under the control of their respective communities to complete the process of vivisection. In the aftermath of the Partition, this realm of disciplinary power led to the production of a historical vacuum, where narratives of rape and abduction were desperately silenced and the raped woman pushed to a place of virtual anonymity. The defilement of communal honour through the violation of the female body resonates through the entire process of nation building and thus the history of Partition remains disturbing to the extent that it engendered a form of collective amnesia until the 1990's, when a revisionist historical scholarship in South East Asian Studies attempted to reconstruct public history by restoring the narratives of women who had been a part of the communal struggle.

In her book, *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Jashodhara Bagchi further observes a discrepancy between the wide collection of narratives from the Partition in the West and the relative absence of such archives with respect to the Partition in the East. She states that, "The first twenty years of Independence in Bengal were clouded by Partition. The women's chronicle in this man-made uprooting by and large remains untold..." (17). Despite the panoptic gaze by the community over the woman's body and sexuality, the body of the raped woman had to be expunged in order to enable the community to nestle and breed, to be integrated within the map of a new nation state. Bagchi remarks that in the Bengal Partition there was no official programme of recovery of the abducted women. Unlike the West, where women were exchanged if they had been left behind in the mass displacement, in Bengal there were no recorded state-sponsored programmes to rehabilitate these women.

The experiences of these women exist in Bengali fiction, the imaginative transcriptions of history but the actuality of memory is forgotten in an attempt to create a mythic correlative. The

grim reality of gender violence is subsumed within a creative discourse and the body of the woman is aesthetically and ideologically transformed into a symbolic entity. The absence of oral testimonies further removes the woman from the public discourse since she cannot articulate the rhetoric of redemption which the nation-state demands. The trauma and pain of the Partition, although acknowledged, is creatively assimilated into fiction by placing the woman in the private world of the home. The cruelty of rape and abduction, the embodied experience of rape and violence are largely mitigated by adopting these strategies. These restrictive methods of representation reflect the social and political aspects of the collective environment where traces of sexual violence are carefully hidden within a grand discourse of reconstruction and community building.

In her book, *Against Our Will*, (1975), Susan Brownmiller suggests that rape functions as a tool of patriarchal control to keep women “in a state of perpetual fear”¹(7). In the context of the Partition, the control of the female body explicitly assumed a communal and political dimension. It served as a deliberate act of power, dominance and humiliation committed by aggressors. Routine and pervasive rape during the Partition which has been suppressed within a regulated and hegemonic socio-cultural discourse makes women’s testimonies tenuous and the ambiguity between women’s silence and speech renders these internal and gendered stories of violence exclusive from the complex nationalist discourse and myth-making. Radical feminist theory of rape as suggested by Brownmiller found corroboration in several other writings which explored rape as serving a larger political agenda. Notably, Bina D’Costa in her book, *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia*, reiterates the necessity of controlling women’s sexuality within the state-building process. Hierarchical relationships that exist between the expressive practices of political actors and the implicit silence of women influence the writing of macro-narratives where gender violence is deemed as entirely undesirable for the domestic audience and the emphasis lies upon the new crisis of the post-independent state. In the context of the Partition, the female body, like the nation-state became a site of contest, where political power could be negotiated and a sense of hyper-masculinity enforced.

¹ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (London: Pelican Books, 1986), 7.

Further, in histories of genocide, rape is used as an instrument of oppression by dominant socio-political groups to generate fear in native minority communities and as a means of ethnic cleansing. The genocide in Bangladesh in 1971, the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and the Bosnian genocide in 1995 provide instances of sexual violence as integral to the ethno-national conflict and representing the extreme end of systematic state-sponsored strategies. To cite an example: the currently accepted estimate in Bangladesh is that nearly 200,000 Bengali women were raped and 25,000 forcefully impregnated during the 'Mukti Juddho' (Liberation War) of 1971. More recently, the Yazidi women have become victims of episodes of sexual enslavement and genocidal rapes in Iraq and Syria under the militarism of the ISIL, establishing how the politics of rape operates within broader social conditions and are regulated by strong cultural factors.

At present, with the emergence of women's rights and the intervention of the media, there is noticeably a tendency to pit the community as a greater ally of women as against the nation-state which poses as a site of harsh surveillance. The delay in justice for crimes related to sexual violence has clearly polarized the sympathy and support of the community towards the victim and viewed the nation as ineffective and antagonistic to the cause of redressal and discipline. However, the body of the woman remains a site of contestation and is further riddled with complexities since it becomes an object of mass consumption as the report of violence is publicised through print and popular visual media. The victim shaming attitude which persists in India makes it difficult for the narratives of women to emerge from the flurry of news reports which gloss over the trauma of the victim and focus on building stories, which chase the investigation of the criminals.

To discuss the politicization of rape, it is important to understand how sexual politics operates in India and draws force from the patriarchal institutions of class, caste and religion. In modern civic societies, the print culture often appropriates responsibility of reporting and disseminating information pertaining to crime and justice, thereby creating a public consciousness. The morally reprehensible act of rape when reported by the media, which has now emerged as a form of corporate oligarchy with vested interests in political lobbyism, becomes involved in a public discourse and serves as a spectacle. The victim almost becomes an object of voyeuristic interest and the print world transforms rape from an intimate, sexual act into

a public symbol that is available for mass consumption. This reflects the central paradox of rape, where victimhood is rendered visible but the ideological and material concerns of rape, (which may be perceived as irrelevant for public discussion) are erased. While always in the background, the flow of mediated crime stories involving violence against women also has the power to engage the public in new, exciting, and sometimes terrifying ways.

The dominant trend in the public representation of rape displaces the woman from the narrative, making rape an occasion for men to speak, to address the legal repercussions of rape, to argue political interventions or to discuss socio-ethnic concerns. The personal trauma or the personal sexual interaction is considered publicly unpalatable and there is an attempt to remove the testimony of the woman or the subject from the retelling of the crime after the initial report of violence. Within the public realm, the narrative of the victim is appropriated to suit competing visions of masculinity focusing attention on men's protection of women's rights. Through this masculinized transformation, rape may be deployed in political battles and to create a form of mass media sensationalism. By replacing women's experiences of their own body with rape stories that rally supporters around the moral and political condemnation of male perpetrators, the deliberate politicization of rape marginalizes testimonies of women survivors.

According to Patil and Purkayastha, there are some well perpetuated myths in terms of the coverage of rape by mainstream media. In their recent work, *Sexual Violence, Race and Media (in) visibility: Intersectional Complexities in a Transnational Frame* (2015), they argue that there are a set of assumptions which determine the ideal potential of a rape story. This leads to the distinction between an 'ideal' rape and a 'non ideal' rape. The ideal tropes identified by the media in the construction of the narrative of rape would typically involve a non-domestic setting, the monstrous male figure of the rapist and the female victim, who would resist the violation. To consider, the case of Nirbhayaⁱ in 2012 and the wide attention which it sparked in the media, it would be interesting to note the ideal conditions which the incident presented for the politicization of sexual violence and its perceived social implications. The key to understanding this process lies in deconstructing the political and ideological anxieties which accompanied it.

The Nirbhaya case drew supporters from across the nation. The issue moved rapidly to the epicenter of a political furor. Waves of popular protest brought the youth of the country to the streets. As various NGOs and community organizations challenged the politicians to take the lead in combating the scourge of rape, government spokespeople scrambled to express their despair and sympathy towards the unfolding saga of sexual violence. Certainly, in the case of Nirbhaya, there was hardly any opportunity to record the victim's inner psychic trauma of rape but the prolonged medical crisis and eventually the death of the victim accounted for its widespread coverage. With rape (in its severest form) rendered as the actions of aberrant and marginal brutes, and victimization represented as merely a gruesome process of bodily violation, the complexities of gender violence were largely neglected.

The Delhi-centric media played an important role not just in terms of the way news about the rape was reported and circulated, but in the ways in which it was produced and gathered too. The cultural location of the victim (the incident occurred in the bustling capital), her class identity and educational profile were some of the factors which contributed to Nirbhaya being regarded as representative of 'everywoman' and the dangers faced by the working class woman living in the metropolitan city. While this media trend positively indicated that reports of gender violence were now more immediate, more visual, more democratic in terms of its production than it was before, the politicization of the incident illustrated the media's inability to confront gendered realities and its tendency to shift the key debate to issues of criminality, deviance and punishment.

On the other hand, the Nirbhaya case which initially triggered concerns about women's lack of safety before turning its attention to the state-sponsored medical care and facility provided to the victim and her family, also initiated a mass movement which led to the expansion of an active protest culture in the country. The punishment for sexual crimes raged fiercely in parliament and in the media, with many sections of civil society vehemently demanding death penalty for the rapists.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that the regulation of sexuality is inherited in the production of the modern state and its conditions of citizenship. Modern sexuality is always, therefore, a political phenomenon: entangled in relations of power such as race, class, status,

generation. The regulation of sexuality, which Foucault addressed, is unusually politicized in these episodes of sexual violence as they emerge within a public discourse. The mounting public recognition of, and concern with, the issue of sexual violence is therefore directly dependent, in the first instance, on its discursive reconstitution in the media, which frames the figure of the perpetrator, the victim of sexual violence and the manner of the violation in distinctly political terms. Secondly, its legitimacy is determined by the degree of state intervention or the lack of it. In an interview with *India Today* on 4th May, 2019, former Delhi Chief Minister, Mrs. Sheila Dikshit was quoted saying that the Nirbhaya case was “blown out of proportion.” Mrs. Dikshit elaborated upon the politicization of rape which is becoming increasingly apparent in the media. “There are so many cases like this taking place today. Sometimes you ignore rapes, just a little thing in the newspaper... little children being raped... and one was made into a political scandal” (*India Today Web Desk*).

It is fundamental to reflect on how an event is remembered, told and interpreted, and how this interpretive framework denounces or avoids the experience of rape. The practice of ‘silencing’ the rape victim often becomes a narrative/political tool to ensure the erasure of the victim’s experience and indicates an attempt at creating a puritan state. The systematic glorification of victims through the media and state mechanism reveals the structural implementation of a strong gender bias and ultimately draws attention from the experience of victimhood to the trial of those responsible for the violation and recovery of personal dignity through justice, which is often complicated by juridical delay and political interference. The cases in point are the recent Unnao (2017) and Kathua (2018) rape casesⁱⁱ, which have shed light on the socio-political nature of atrocities against women and the faulty model for reconciliation operating through a series of carefully designed public commissions and highly publicised investigations as a substitute for a rigorous criminal law concerning rape. There is a need to shift the modalities of analysis: from structure to agency by insisting on the subjectively-felt nature of experience, dissociating the victim from the structural grip of a larger social consciousness and critically examining the subjective testimony from the perspective of lived experience. After all, experience frames a social being and is created through compelling socio-historical and religious arrangements and politics.

In the context of the Partition, the testimonies or narratives of the victims, were not authorized or legitimized by anyone else, yet they were invested with a sense of autonomy which is a prerequisite for framing any kind of historiography. Since rape is a gendered crime, the private testimony manifests the symbolic meaning that the incident assumes for the subject. Accordingly, notions of femininity and subjectivity come into play in defining the social meaning of rape in a particular historical and political setting.

At present, while it is useful to think that media reports on rape arouse a social consciousness by providing information that the public has a right to know and by reporting events factually, in reality the publication of ‘facts’ achieves a very different effect. Revelation of details such as the victim’s occupation, background and family history is necessary but one must be critical of its practical purposes and judge the media trends which determine the coverage of the narrative. An emphasis on the lived experiences of women survivors would help in identifying the knowledge gaps and shifting the epistemological framework from the political to the personal, from the public to the private. While current media trends appear irreversible, the analysis of rape victimization may be more sensitively turned towards addressing the physical, behavioral, cognitive, and inter personal trauma experienced by rape victims in the aftermath of the rape.

The conceptualization of trauma through media platforms which seeks to interpret the social process of the traumatic event must necessarily address the experience of rape itself. It may be argued that the recovery of the victim (both medical and psychological) remains an interior process which does not solicit a public enquiry. Nonetheless, as the media traces the legal developments of a rape case, conducts semi-structured interviews to gather demographic and assault information, it would be prescriptive to reconstruct the experience of the woman, to record the effective counseling or therapy available to and undergone by the victim. Observing the psychological dynamics of the survivor may yield a more valuable framework of interpretation as opposed to the emphasis on other-focused emotions and other-centered responses to rape.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ The 'Nirbhaya' case refers to the gang rape and fatal assault of a 23 year old woman in Munirka, South Delhi on 16th December, 2012, which generated widespread public protests in India seeking severe punishment for the accused. The brutality of the crime called into attention issues of women's safety in the country and the need for immediate action. The victim fought for her life for eleven days before her succumbing to her injuries. She was recognized as 'Nirbhaya' meaning 'fearless', and her struggle became a symbol of women's courage and resistance towards violence in the country.

ⁱⁱ The Unnao rape case refers to the gang rape of a 17 year old girl in Unnao, Uttar Pradesh on 4th June 2017. It became widely publicized after politician, Kuldeep Singh Sengar was arrested and convicted for the alleged crime. The Kathua rape case refers to the abduction, rape and murder of an 8 year old girl from the Bakarwal community in Rasana village near Kathua in Jammu and Kashmir in January 2018. The case led to widespread communal tensions in Jammu and Kashmir and sparked protests across India, with political parties also expressing their severe condemnation of the crime.

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