



The Price Paid by Women: Gendered Violence and Subaltern Women depicted in *The Other side of Silence* by Urvashi Butalia

Taqdees Fatima¹, Dr. Tripti Tyagi²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, FMeH, Manav Rachna Institute of Research and Studies, Faridabad, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, FMeH, Manav Rachna Institute of Research and Studies, Faridabad, India

Received: 05 Nov 2023; Received in revised form: 12 Dec 2023; Accepted: 20 Dec 2023; Available online: 31 Dec 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The Indian-Pakistan partition in 1947 witnessed the vulnerability of the women as they were prey to the men's harassment and abuse. Women experienced brutal violence and suffered physically, mentally and emotionally during the traumatic communal riots. Thousands of women were repeatedly abducted, raped, mutilated and publicly humiliated by their male counterparts. Women were forced to commit suicide to protect their families' honour and chastity. The partition was a traumatic and heart-wrenching episode for the women as exploitation, subjugation, and gender inequality was mercilessly inflicted upon them by the males of their families and religious communities. Women's dignity and identity were invisible to the eyes of the males whose bodies they mutilated, violated, impregnated, and tattooed with religious slogans. Women were married to their abductors by male members of their families. As a result, women lived as domestic servants or sex workers. Moreover, women willing to reunite with their families after recovery and enduring psychological trauma were turned down and labelled as contaminated. Eventually, they were outcasted and compelled to stay with their abductors to protect their family's honour. The partition divided India and Pakistan with enmity, bloodshed and destruction. During the separation, women were categorised as 'the other' whose purpose was to endure the sufferings and brutality of masculine politics and perform traditional roles. In religious texts and sermons, women are worshipped as goddesses; on the contrary, they are subjugated and oppressed in a male-dominated society. Urvashi mentioned, 'Men almost instigate violence, but women feel its greatest impact'. Bahri stated that the violence against women during partition was against their individuality, community, family, and nation. Division in 1947 was considered the Indian holocaust, where thousands of women were raped and abducted. This paper discusses the patriarchal nature of society and the traumatic violence experienced by women during the partition. It highlights the inhumane and brutal acts of the men, including the officers who oppressed and objectified women after their 'recovery'. And dwells on projecting the hardships, struggles, plights and resilience of the victimised women who experienced torture and betrayal by their male counterparts. This paper discusses the traumatic events experienced by the subaltern women who failed to raise their voices against the injustices and brutality because they were ashamed and vulnerable. The subaltern women accepted to sacrifice their lives for the community and religion to become martyrs. Gender politics and toxic masculinity led to mayhem, inequality, destruction and inflicted pain and suffering on the women through rape, abduction, and self-immolation, forced marriages in a discriminatory and horrendous way in the patriarchal society during the partition negotiations.*



Keywords— *Partition, Female Subaltern, Violence, Victimhood, Patriarchy, Objectification, Rape, Suicide*

The India-Pakistan Partition created anarchy, violence and pain in different religious communities. During the Partition, women experienced brutal violence as ferocious mobs attacked them. Gender violence was a typical form of violence in a male-dominated society. Women were raped, mutilated, forcibly married and abducted in the wake of unprecedented violence. Undoubtedly, women suffered violence as their bodies were the domain of control and rule in the patriarchal constructed society. Millet said, 'males and females are two cultures, and their life experiences are utterly different'. (2) Women are docile and incapi

Butalia stated that Kamlaben rescued several abducted women and narrated the horrific circumstances of the women when she was interviewed. Kamlaben could not speak about the victimised women earlier as she was baffled for decades to process the barbaric or inhumane acts of the men against the women. Most of the rescued women were the 'subalterns', and they failed to assimilate the gender politics during the Partition. The Partition generated communal animosity, and women suffered excruciating violence by families, communities and the State. The barbaric tragedy questioned the morality and humanity of the male counterparts who inflicted trauma and suppression on women during the partition negotiation.

Urvashi Butalia portrays the horrendous gendered violence in the *Other Side of Silence*: "Nearly 75000 women had been raped and abducted on both sides of the border at Partition...Apart from rapes, other specific kinds of violence had been visited on women. Many were paraded naked in the streets, and several had their breasts cut off, their bodies tattooed with marks of the 'other' religion; in a bid to defile the so-called 'purity' of the race, women were forced to have sex with men of the other religion, many were impregnated. Sometimes families traded in their women in exchange for freedom; at other times the women hundreds, indeed thousands, of women had been subjected to rape and abduction" (132)

Kamlaben asserted that during the Partition, the mob appeared like demons and caused destruction, death, violence, displacement and dispossession on a large scale, "it was when the demon gets into Shivji that he dances the tandav nritya, the dance of death and destruction" (133). Kamlaben mentioned that the plight of the women who returned to their families was stigmatised, and the recovered women were forced to relocate with their abductors or rapists and accept a new life as they were 'polluted'. When the men of the families were asked about the 'disappearance' of their sisters or wives, there would be an awkward silence where they would not engage in conversations because they were ashamed to talk about them.

Honour killing and rape were among the most common forms of violence inflicted upon women. Women were compelled to jump into wells and drown to death to protect their chastity. According to the male counterparts, if the attackers had tarnished a woman's reputation, she should have been killed in the patriarchal hegemony. Mangal Singh confessed in the interview that he 'killed' several women and children because he feared rape and abduction while protecting themselves from the Muslim attackers. Mangal refused to use the word 'killed' in his narration because the appropriate word was 'martyred' according to his patriarchal ideologies. He admitted that the women were willing to sacrifice their lives and permitted him to make them 'martyrs'. Singh said, "the real fear was one of dishonour. If the Muslims had caught them, our honour, their honour would have been lost, sacrificed. If you have pride, you do not fear" (195).

Kidwai came across several cases of abducted Muslim women exploited and manipulated by police and army officers. In *Azadi ki Chaon Mein*, she writes about the hypocrisy and duality of the State, which used its power to politicise gender. Men were inadequate in protecting women's honour despite being masculine. Kidwai's narration demonstrates the objectification and commodification of a woman in a dehumanised manner: "In all of this, sometimes a girl would be killed, or she would be wounded. The 'good stuff' would be shared among the police and army, and the 'second-rate stuff' would go to everyone else. And then these girls would go from one hand to another and then another and after several would turn up in hotels to grace their décor, or they would be handed over to police officers, in some places to please them". (142)

Women were the most vulnerable targets and endured suppression, discrimination, sexual violence and mental trauma. Women witnessed the deaths of their children and husbands, which was next to death experience for them as wives and mothers. The violence against women projected the patriarchal notion of the purity and honour of a woman. If a woman was tainted by the attacker or was sexually abused, she no longer is acceptable in society as she could not find a reputable man for marriage. A woman's identity depended on her chastity and reputation. Once it was destroyed, a woman should either die or live as an outcast as she was worthless or insignificant to others. Many Sikh women were willing to "jump into wells" proudly and determinedly as it would be more honourable instead to "fall into the hands of Muslims" (128). In a patriarchal society, men are accountable for the safety and security of women, but ironically men failed to protect their wives or sisters from rape and abduction. Women sacrificed their lives to defend their honour and dignity by committing suicide as they were taught by young age by the patriarchal society

that "women's honour is her strength and clothes" (23). Women during the Partition submitted themselves to patriarchal culture and implemented the ideology of self-immolation to protect the prestige and reputation of their families and communities.

On the contrary, Butalia mentioned that a few women displayed their unwillingness to commit suicide and were determined to fight for themselves. One of the women, Basant Kaur, reluctantly jumped into the well as the male family members coerced her to die in the name of honour to protect their reputation in society. Basant knew the accusations and judgements would not allow her to live even if she escaped her death. These women, willing or unwilling, were all the victims of "patriarchal consensus" (212). Moreover, the situation was miserable for women because "those who did not commit suicide were raped in public and then murdered" (128).

Forced marriages and religious conversions were gruesome acts attempted by men from other religious communities to display power and control over women. Women with infants were determined to live in solitude as they knew that they would be humiliated and degraded by their relations and would give constant reminders of their violation. Women went to places like brothels, temples, or ashrams for comfort and safety but experienced distress and anguish. The families refused to accept them if they had children or were impregnated by men of other religions. Therefore, women "had suffered a double dislocation due to the partition" (16) because they endured physical, mental, social and psychological pain and suppression, discrimination and disapproval from the community. The government treated them miserably, was negligent about their sacrifices and hardships, and failed to provide protection and assistance. Male counterparts were mere spectators and validated the deaths or repudiation of the women preferable to "falling into the enemy's custody". (129)

Women feared rejection, judgement and degradation from their relatives and society and decided to live in solitude without disclosing their identity to others. Consequently, women failed to raise their voices against oppression and injustices launched at them during the Partition and endured the agonies with resilience. Women were perceived as the "secondary sex" and displayed pride and toxic masculinity after sexually assaulting the rival women. Urvashi Butalia brings out women's plight and agonies in her book *The Other Side of Silence* and shares the story of Damyanti Sahgal because Damyanti became the voice of the voiceless. Damyanti "recovered the voices of women who experienced such violence" (114) during the Partition. Damyanti narrated her vulnerability when she was without

financial and emotional support and pleaded with people to accompany her to reunite with her family. However, they refused as it was dangerous for her to travel with them. However, she followed them with her "feet getting scratched, bruised, no warm clothes, dying of cold" (122) without their willingness. The men did not want to be associated with her and said, "we'll fetch you some water or something, and they slipped away. They had to get rid of me somehow". (122)

Damyanti requested the policeman to connect her with Deputy Commissioner at Dharamshala. The policeman sympathetically stopped a bus for her. The driver denied accommodating Damyanti. When the policeman mentioned that "this poor unfortunate woman is a victim of circumstance, you have to take her" (122). The conductor opened the back door as there was no room in the bus, and Damyanti adjusted herself in the tiny space though her body was stiff and her legs were swollen. Damyanti narrated, "I began to throw up, I was half fainting...I did not know what to do. I kept vomiting into my kurta, my kurta and dhoti, I kept filling my vomit into my clothes, and I kept on being sick" (123). Damyanti was in such a miserable condition, demonstrating her mental, physical and emotional suffering in the narration.

Butalia shared the story of Zainab, a young Muslim girl who had been abducted and sexually assaulted by several anonymous men and had sold to Buta Singh in Amritsar. Buta Singh married her, and both fell in love with each other. Buta and Zainab had a family and were living a harmonious life. 'It was suspected that Buta Singh's brother had informed the search party of Zainab's whereabouts' (127) when the search party was on a mission to look out for abducted women. Unfortunately, Zainab was traced and was 'rescued' (127) but could not express her desire to stay with her husband and children as she could not make decisions for her life. She was humiliated and compelled to abandon Buta Singh and her elder daughter. The newspaper described the scene as poignant: "she came slowly out of her house, carrying her child, and clutching a small bundle of clothes. Her belongings were stowed in the jeep, and as Zainab boarded it, she turned to Buta Singh and said: take care of this girl and do not worry. I will be back soon." (128)

Zainab was rescued because her uncle wanted Zainab's property that she had received from her deceased father. "He was keen the land remains in his family, and he wanted that Zainab when found, should marry his son" (128). Zainab experienced excruciating pain when she was forcibly married to her cousin. Buta was heartbroken and sorrowful when Zainab rejected his offer to return to India. Zainab said, "I am a married woman. Now I have nothing to do with this man. He can take his second child" (130).

Zainab failed to fight for her choices and continued to 'live' in silence. She could not mourn for Buta openly as she was a victim who had no choice but to change her fate except to suffer at the hands of her relatives and society. Butalia mentioned that Zainab was 'one among thousands of such women' who suffered oppression and gender discrimination in silence like a subaltern, and their voices were hardly heard.

The states could not protect their citizens, particularly women and failed to compensate those women who were killed, abducted and raped. The patriarchal ideologies were imposed on women because they were rescued from their abductors and had no choice but to make decisions for themselves, even if they desired to live with them. If a rescued woman revealed her pregnancy, she would be coerced to abort 'the seed of another religion', and a woman with an 'impure' womb could pollute the entire community. Therefore, "women had to be removed from those 'other' non-acceptable families and relocated into the 'real' ones. This, for the State, was the honourable thing to do" (192). Women in the patriarchal society were considered passive, docile, pure and obedient to men as they were considered aggressive and potent and could display their masculinity or power on women's individuality. "The assumption was that even if asked for their opinion, women would not be able to voice an independent one because they were in situations of oppression" (192). Women became the victims of the India-Pakistan Partition irrespective of caste, religion and creed and were stigmatised in the patriarchal terms of honour and dignity and were subjected to male atrocities and enmity.

Menon and Bhasin stated that "the unprecedented barbarity on women's bodies as preferred sites becomes the most predictable form of violence on women, as the men of one community sexually assaulted the women of other communities, to simultaneously humiliate the 'other' openly 'dishonouring' their women" (41). The sacrifice of the women who died during the Partition to protect their honour were compared to Rajput women who proudly "undertook mass immolation when they lost their husbands in the war" (209). Ironically, the rescued or saved women were compared to the 'martyrs' who were perceived as inferior because they were 'contaminated' by their male counterparts and failed to preserve the honour of the community and religion. Urvashi mentioned that "many pamphlets were published which used the story of Sita's abduction by Ravana, showing how she remained pure despite her time away from her husband. The purity of the woman was of much more importance within India." (161)

Khushwant Singh in *Train to Pakistan* depicts the horrendous and barbaric scenario of communal riots between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs during the Partition.

Sikh mobs assaulted Muslim women as they became the soft target of being avenged by the enemies of the other border. Women from affluent families were not exempted from experiencing or witnessing the men's brutality. "They (Muslims) had heard of gentlewomen having their veils taken off, being stripped and marched down crowded streets to be raped in the marketplace" (127). Singh demonstrated that communal hatred was mutual, and like Hindu and Sikh counterparts, they were equally engaged in inhumane activities to inflict pain and suffering on women. Muslim women committed suicide to sacrifice their lives for religion and honour like scapegoats.

During the Partition, men were not ashamed or hesitant to treat women as objects of submission, domination, or possessions to be conquered. Men were insensitive and indifferent towards women's plight. They mocked women who were abducted and sexually assaulted because, in society, women are subordinate to men and are the secondary sex of the community who is insignificant to serve in patriarchal hegemony if she is "impure". The dialogue between Jugga and Bhola depicts "hegemonic masculinity" and perceives women as sexual objects that men can control and dominate. "Bholeya, I hear many women are being abducted and sold cheap. You could find a wife for yourself. Why, Sardara, if you can find a Mussulmanni without paying for her, am I impotent that I should have to buy an abducted woman? Replied Bhola" (73).

Nahal in *Azaadi* vividly describes women's miserable condition and the male exploitation of female sexuality through abduction and rape: "Many kidnapped women disappeared into private homes. The rest were subjected to mass rape, at times in public places. Many of the pregnant women had their wombs torn open. The rape was followed by other atrocities, the chopping of their breasts and even death. Many of the pregnant women had their wombs torn open. The survivors were retained for repeated rapes and humiliations" (258). Women's bodies belonged to men to quench their lust discarding the 'moral obligation' because women are accountable for safeguarding their honour and dignity irrespective of community, religion and nation.

The rescued, 'abducted' women had endured accusations and embarrassment from their families and communities because they were 'used' and brought disgrace to the family: "the women that were discovered were led away silently by their families". The family members were humiliated to accept them and showed no empathy and joy towards them: "there was no joy at the reunion; some seemed sorry for the girls had come back at all, spoiled and dishonoured" (282). The duality of the men during the Partition is evident as they labelled the recovered women with derogatory terms like

'spoiled', 'fallen' and 'impure'. Butalia has questioned women's subaltern condition in the patriarchal society where men failed to raise their voices against injustices towards the destitute and victimised women because they were ashamed to describe the audacious sexual violence inflicted upon them during the riots. Butalia said, "Bir Bahadur had not mentioned that she was his mother because in having escaped death, she could not be classed with the women who had died. Much easier, then, to speak of the sister who died as an 'honourable' death, than the mother who survived" (213).

CONCLUSION

Urvashi displays the plight of the marginalised and the subaltern position of women during the Partition. Women experienced victimhood and trauma in the patriarchal hegemonic society where women were subordinate to men. Women were silenced because the horrific memories of rape and abduction were vivid. Therefore, women could not raise their voices against the patriarchal discourse where the community and family members questioned their reputation and dignity. Women were afraid to share their stories as they believed that they could be brought shame and disgrace to their families. Ironically, women's status in society has been conditioned by the so-called culture and religion where a woman's role is confined to the house's walls. Women during the Partition displayed courage and strength to fight the abductors by providing domestic weapons like kitchen knives. On the contrary, men failed to protect their women's honour during the partition violence. Singh, Kidwai and Nahal highlighted the dehumanised and indescribable sufferings of women who belonged to different religions or communities as they suffered equally, experienced identity crises, and were objectified and sexualised in the male-dominated society.

Women, particularly Dalits and Muslims, were subjected to discrimination by the Sikhs and Hindus as they did not offer protection to such vulnerable women who were ostracised by the violence. People of the states displayed inhumanity and immorality to others and killed each other in the name of honour and religion. Moreover, women and girls who belonged to higher castes in the village were coerced to die and become martyrs to protect their 'virginity' and 'honour'; otherwise, they would become 'contaminated' or 'polluted', and the rescued women who struggled to reunite with their families were denied access to live with them because they were 'impure'. Women experienced gendered violence from the family, community and the State, which failed to ensure the women's safety as they became the target of violence and torture as secondary sex in patriarchal societies. Gender politics created a partition holocaust for the women who

were the 'primary' victims of the partition violence. Consequently, women suffered more than men and experienced intense brutality and trauma without any fault of their except one that they were born as 'other' in the patriarchal society where they are the pawns for men's moral and societal obligations.

REFERENCES

- [1] Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from Partition of India*. Penguin, 2017.
- [2] Beauvoir, De Simone. *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 2011.
- [3] Singh Khushwant. *Train to Pakistan*. Penguin 2007.
- [4] Kidwai, Anis. *Freedom's Shade*. Penguin, 2011.
- [5] Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality*. Penguin. 1976.
- [6] Chandra, Subhas. *Killing During Partition*. International Journal of English Literature, Vol.12, 1980.
- [7] Nahal, Chaman. *Azadi*. Penguin, 2001