



# Partition's Gendered Toll: Violence and the Silenced Lives of Subaltern Women in Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*

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**Abstract**— *The 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan exposed the extreme vulnerability of women, who became primary targets of gendered violence amidst the chaos. Women suffered extensively—physically, psychologically, and emotionally—during the communal riots, facing abduction, rape, mutilation, and public humiliation. Many were driven to suicide in an attempt to preserve their families' honour and personal dignity. The traumatic impact of Partition on women was marked by the widespread infliction of patriarchal oppression, subjugation, and gender-based injustice, often at the hands of both strangers and their own male kin and community members. Women's bodies were transformed into battlegrounds, mutilated, violated, and impregnated with religious symbols, reducing them to instruments of political and religious aggression. The Partition did not merely divide a nation but unleashed a tide of bloodshed, destruction, and dehumanization—especially for women, who were relegated to the margins as the "other." While religious ideologies often exalted women as divine figures, the socio-political reality was one of brutal subordination and silencing within a deeply patriarchal order. This paper explores the entrenched patriarchal norms and the gendered violence experienced by women during the Partition. It examines the cruelty inflicted not only by male aggressors but also by institutional forces, including state authorities, who often dehumanized and objectified women even after their recovery.*



**Keywords**— *Partition, Female Subaltern, Violence, Victimhood, Patriarchy, Objectification.*

The Partition of India and Pakistan led to widespread chaos, sectarian violence, and deep suffering across religious communities. In this violent upheaval, women became primary victims, subjected to extreme forms of gendered violence as frenzied mobs unleashed brutal assaults upon them. Acts of rape, abduction, forced marriages, and mutilation were common, reflecting the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms of a male-dominated society. In such a socio-political framework, women's bodies became symbolic territories over which power and control were exercised. Feminist theorist Kate Millet has argued that men and women inhabit fundamentally different cultural and experiential realities, with women often rendered passive and powerless. This notion is particularly evident in the context of Partition, where the female body was reduced to a site of patriarchal conquest

and domination. Urvashi Butalia recounts the testimony of Kamlaben, a woman who played a key role in rescuing abducted women during Partition. When interviewed, Kamlaben revealed the horrifying conditions these women had endured but also admitted her prolonged silence, shaped by years of emotional shock and moral conflict over the atrocities committed. Many of the women Kamlaben rescued were subalterns—those marginalized by class, gender, and caste—and they lacked the agency or language to comprehend, resist, or articulate the gendered violence they experienced. These women were doubly silenced, not only by their oppressors but also by the structural systems that failed them. The communal tensions of Partition deepened this suffering, as families, communities, and even the state contributed to the oppression of women. The horrific violence of Partition

raises urgent questions about the ethical and moral failures of the men who perpetrated such acts. It exposes the complex dynamics of gender, power, and violence at the heart of one of the subcontinent's most traumatic historical events.

In *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia offers a harrowing account of the gendered violence that unfolded during the Partition of India. She notes that approximately 75,000 women were raped and abducted on both sides of the newly drawn border. Beyond these acts of sexual violence, women were subjected to uniquely brutal forms of torture: many were stripped and paraded naked through the streets, had their breasts mutilated, and their bodies marked with religious symbols of the "enemy" faith. In efforts to dishonour and defile the perceived racial or communal "purity," women were coerced into sexual acts with men of opposing religions and were often forcibly impregnated. In some cases, women were bartered by their own families in desperate bids for safety and freedom. This widespread violence was not incidental but systematic, targeting women's bodies as sites of political and religious assertion. Kamlaben, one of the individuals cited by Butalia, described the mob violence during Partition as demonic in its intensity, drawing a comparison to the mythological *tandav nritya*—the dance of death and destruction performed by Lord Shiva when possessed by rage. This metaphor underscores the scale and ferocity of the communal violence, which led to mass killings, displacements, and profound psychological trauma. Kamlaben also recounted the tragic fate of women who were "recovered" after abduction. Rather than being welcomed back into their families, these women were often stigmatized, viewed as "polluted" or dishonoured, and compelled to return to or remain with their abductors or rapists. Families, burdened by shame and societal pressure, avoided speaking about their missing or violated daughters, sisters, and wives. When questioned, the men would often remain silent, unwilling or unable to confront the traumatic truth. During the Partition, honour killings and rape emerged as some of the most pervasive and brutal forms of violence against women. Under the weight of patriarchal norms and societal expectations, many women were forced to commit suicide—often by drowning themselves in wells—in order to safeguard their "honour" and uphold their families' perceived sense of purity. Within this patriarchal framework, a woman's chastity was considered so central to familial and communal honour that any violation, or even the threat of it, was deemed a fate worse than death.

In an interview featured by Urvashi Butalia, Mangal Singh recounted that he had taken the lives of several women and children during Partition, motivated by

the fear that they might fall into the hands of Muslim attackers and be raped or abducted. However, he avoided using the term "killed" to describe his actions. Instead, influenced by patriarchal ideology, he insisted on referring to these women as "martyrs," suggesting that their deaths were noble sacrifices made for the preservation of communal honour. According to Singh, the women themselves consented to this fate, believing it preferable to the dishonour of sexual violence. He remarked, "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). This testimony reflects the deeply ingrained patriarchal values that governed gender relations during Partition, where the autonomy and lives of women were subordinated to the preservation of male-defined honour and societal pride.

The tragic phenomenon of Sikh women choosing to drown themselves in wells rather than be captured by Muslim men exemplifies how deeply internalized these patriarchal values were. Many embraced suicide as a form of honourable resistance, believing that death was preferable to sexual violation. Within this framework, the male responsibility to protect women stood in ironic contrast to their actual failure during Partition. Women were indoctrinated from an early age with the belief that their worth was tied to modesty and honour—symbolized by their clothing and virtue. Ultimately, women during the Partition internalized and enacted patriarchal ideologies, often resorting to self-immolation or suicide in order to preserve familial and communal honour. Their suffering, sacrifice, and silence stand as testament to a gendered tragedy shaped by the intersection of violence, nationalism, and patriarchy. In contrast to the dominant narrative of women's passive submission during Partition, Urvashi Butalia highlights that some women resisted the expectation of self-sacrifice and chose to assert their will to live. One such example is Basant Kaur, who, despite being pressured by male relatives to jump into a well to preserve familial honour, did so with reluctance. She was aware that, even if she survived, society's harsh judgments and moral scrutiny would make life intolerable. Butalia frames such women—whether they submitted willingly or were coerced—as victims of a broader "patriarchal consensus" (212), wherein societal expectations and male authority determined their fate. Those who did not take their own lives were often subjected to public rape and then brutally murdered, illustrating the grim options available to them (128).

The violence extended beyond death and suicide, as forced marriages and religious conversions became instruments through which men from opposing communities exercised dominance and control over

women's bodies and identities. Many women with infants chose to live in isolation, fully aware that returning to their families would subject them to humiliation, rejection, and constant reminders of their trauma. Seeking refuge in places like brothels, temples, and ashrams, they found little solace, as these spaces also failed to provide safety or emotional healing. Families frequently disowned women who had been raped or impregnated by men from other religions, reinforcing the social stigma attached to sexual violence. As a result, women experienced a "double dislocation" (16)—first through the physical and emotional trauma of Partition, and then through the societal rejection and alienation that followed. They bore the weight of psychological, social, and bodily suffering in silence, abandoned by both the community and the state. The government, indifferent to their plight, offered little to no support or recognition of their sacrifices and traumas. Meanwhile, male relatives often distanced themselves from any responsibility, justifying women's deaths or abandonment as preferable to the "dishonour" of falling into the hands of the enemy (129). This patriarchal logic not only dehumanized women but also normalized their suffering as a necessary sacrifice for the preservation of communal pride.

During the Partition, many women chose to live in isolation, concealing their identities out of fear of societal rejection, judgment, and humiliation. The stigma surrounding sexual violence and notions of dishonour silenced countless women, who, despite enduring profound suffering, were unable to voice their trauma or seek justice. Women bore their pain in silence, displaying immense resilience in the face of gendered oppression. In a patriarchal society that deemed them the "secondary sex," their suffering was compounded by the toxic masculinity of men who, after sexually violating women from rival communities, used violence as a form of power and pride. In *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia brings these hidden narratives to the forefront, offering space to the silenced voices of Partition survivors. One such voice is that of Damyanti Sahgal, who became a representative of countless women who endured immense violence and marginalization. Through Damyanti's testimony, Butalia recovers the experiences of women whose suffering had long been excluded from mainstream historical accounts (114). Damyanti's personal narrative reveals her vulnerability and abandonment after being left without emotional or financial support. She pleaded with fellow travelers to help her reunite with her family, but they refused, fearing the dangers of being associated with her. Despite their reluctance, Damyanti followed them barefoot, her body exposed to the cold, with scratched and bruised feet and no warm clothing to protect her. The men

attempted to evade her, offering excuses like fetching water before disappearing altogether. As she recalls, "they had to get rid of me somehow" (122). Desperate, Damyanti turned to a policeman for help, requesting that he contact the Deputy Commissioner in Dharamshala. The policeman sympathized with her plight and flagged down a bus, but the driver was unwilling to let her board. Only after the officer emphasized that she was "a victim of circumstance" did the conductor reluctantly allow her to board through the back door. There was no space, and Damyanti was forced to squeeze into a cramped area with a stiff, swollen body. Her physical and emotional torment became overwhelming. She recounts vomiting repeatedly during the journey, with no container or help: "I began to throw up, I was half fainting... I did not know what to do. I kept vomiting into my kurta... I kept on being sick" (123). Her condition powerfully illustrates the depths of physical exhaustion, psychological trauma, and social abandonment experienced by women like her during and after the Partition.

In *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia recounts the tragic story of Zainab, a young Muslim girl who had been abducted during the Partition, subjected to sexual violence by multiple unknown men, and eventually sold to Buta Singh in Amritsar. Over time, Buta Singh married Zainab, and the two developed a genuine emotional bond, building a life together and starting a family. However, their happiness was short-lived. During a government-led recovery operation aimed at locating abducted women, it is suspected that Buta Singh's own brother disclosed Zainab's whereabouts (127). Once found, Zainab was forcibly "rescued"—a term used officially, though she had no agency in the matter and could not voice her desire to remain with her husband and children. Her autonomy was completely disregarded. She was shamed, separated from her family, and compelled to leave Buta Singh and their elder daughter behind. One newspaper account described the heartbreaking moment of her departure: Zainab emerged slowly from her home, carrying her child and a small bundle of clothes. After placing her belongings in the jeep, she turned to Buta Singh and said, "Take care of this girl and do not worry. I will be back soon" (128). Despite this hopeful statement, her return never materialized. The motivation behind Zainab's forced repatriation was not rooted in concern for her well-being, but in familial greed. Her uncle was primarily interested in claiming Zainab's inheritance—land left to her by her deceased father—and sought to ensure it remained within the family by arranging her marriage to his own son (128). Zainab was thus subjected to yet another form of violence: coerced marriage to her cousin, causing her further emotional and psychological

anguish. When Buta Singh later attempted to reunite with her, Zainab rejected him, asserting, "I am a married woman. Now I have nothing to do with this man. He can take his second child" (130). Her words reveal the deep pain and resignation she felt, as well as the social and familial pressures that stripped her of personal agency and emotional choice. The story of Zainab is emblematic of how patriarchal and political structures during Partition denied women their autonomy and reduced them to pawns in broader familial and communal agendas.

Zainab was ultimately unable to assert her personal choices and was forced to endure her suffering in silence. Though she had experienced love and stability with Buta Singh, she could not grieve his loss openly, as she had become subject to societal and familial control. Her agency was stripped away, leaving her no option but to conform to the expectations of her community. Urvashi Butalia emphasizes that Zainab's story was not unique—she was just "one among thousands of such women" who, like subalterns, endured systemic gender-based oppression and silencing, their experiences largely erased from public memory. The newly formed states, India and Pakistan, failed in their responsibility to protect their citizens, particularly women, during and after Partition. Women who were abducted, raped, or killed received no justice or reparation. Instead of restoring their dignity, state institutions often reinforced patriarchal ideologies under the guise of "rescue" operations. Women who had formed relationships with their abductors were not allowed to make decisions for themselves, even when they desired to remain with them. If a rescued woman disclosed a pregnancy, she was pressured to terminate it, as the child—seen as the "seed of another religion"—was considered a threat to the purity of the community. Women with so-called "impure" wombs were viewed as polluting influences. Therefore, state officials believed it was their moral duty to remove these women from "unacceptable" households and reintegrate them into "legitimate" familial structures. As Butalia points out, this was seen as the "honourable" course of action by the state (192).

Patriarchal society cast women as submissive, pure, and obedient, while men were depicted as assertive, dominant, and the rightful enforcers of social control. Women's individuality was consistently undermined by masculine power, and their inability to express dissent was often assumed. Even when asked their opinions, it was believed that women could not form or articulate independent views because of the oppressive circumstances they lived under (192). Ultimately, women from all religious and caste backgrounds became victims of Partition's brutality. They were stigmatized through

patriarchal constructions of honour and dignity and subjected to violence, silencing, and betrayal at the hands of male-dominated institutions and communities. Menon and Bhasin argue that during the Partition, women's bodies were deliberately targeted as symbolic battlegrounds, becoming the primary sites for communal violence. Sexual assault against women of opposing religious communities served as a strategic act of humiliation, intended to disgrace the "other" by violating their women and thus undermining their collective honour (41). The women who died by suicide to preserve their chastity were often romanticized, likened to Rajput women who historically performed mass self-immolation (*jauhar*) following the death of their husbands in battle (209).

In contrast, women who survived abduction and were later "rescued" were viewed with contempt. Rather than being celebrated, these women were considered tainted or "polluted" and, therefore, inferior to those who had died. Their perceived failure to protect the honour of their family and religion resulted in their marginalization, despite their victimhood. Urvashi Butalia notes the cultural reinforcement of these ideals, observing how pamphlets circulated stories like that of Sita's abduction in the *Ramayana*, emphasizing her unwavering purity during captivity. These narratives served to reinforce the paramount importance of female chastity in Indian society (161). Khushwant Singh, in his novel *Train to Pakistan*, vividly portrays the brutal communal violence between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs that marked the Partition, further underscoring the inhumanity and devastation of the period. During the Partition, Sikh mobs targeted Muslim women, using them as vulnerable symbols through which to exact revenge against perceived enemies across the border. Women, regardless of their social or economic status, were not spared from the brutality of communal violence. Even those from elite families suffered or witnessed horrific acts, as illustrated in accounts where "gentlewomen" were forcibly unveiled, stripped, paraded through crowded streets, and raped in public marketplaces (127). Khushwant Singh highlights that the communal violence was reciprocal in nature—Muslims, like their Hindu and Sikh counterparts, also committed acts of extreme cruelty against women, often leading Muslim women to take their own lives in the name of honour and religious devotion, effectively turning them into sacrificial victims. During this period, patriarchal norms enabled men to treat women as objects—of conquest, domination, and submission—without guilt or accountability. Women were perceived as subordinate beings, whose worth was defined by their sexual purity. Abducted and violated women were often mocked and devalued, considered impure and therefore unworthy of respect or reintegration into society.



The deeply rooted patriarchal structure reinforced the notion that a woman who had lost her chastity was no longer fit to serve within the social order.

The hypocrisy of male behavior during Partition is laid bare in this context, as men labeled these women with derogatory terms such as “fallen,” “spoiled,” and “impure,” rather than acknowledging their suffering. Urvashi Butalia interrogates this patriarchal logic, particularly the subaltern status imposed on women. She critiques the societal silence surrounding the experiences of victimized women, pointing out that men, including family members, often refrained from speaking about such incidents due to shame. Butalia provides an example with Bir Bahadur, who chose not to mention that a woman survivor was his mother because her survival, rather than death, was seen as dishonorable. It was easier, Butalia observes, to glorify the “honourable” death of a sister than to acknowledge the existence of a mother who had lived through such unspeakable violence (213).

### CONCLUSION

Urvashi Butalia powerfully illustrates the suffering and marginalization of women during the Partition, emphasizing their subaltern status within a patriarchal and hierarchical society. Women experienced deep trauma and victimization, as they were consistently subordinated to male authority. The silence imposed upon them stemmed from the intensely traumatic memories of abduction and sexual violence, which they were often unable—or unwilling—to recount. This silence was further enforced by societal expectations and familial scrutiny, where a woman's dignity and honour were constantly questioned. Fearing social ostracism and disgrace, many women chose to suppress their experiences, internalizing the belief that their suffering would tarnish their family's reputation. Women's roles were narrowly defined by religious and cultural norms, confining them to domestic spheres. Despite these constraints, many women demonstrated acts of resistance—some fought their attackers using household tools like kitchen knives. In contrast, men often failed to protect the very honour they imposed upon their female relatives. Writers such as Singh, Kidwai, and Nahal document the dehumanizing and unspeakable violence endured by women across all religious and social divisions, revealing a shared suffering marked by loss of identity, objectification, and sexual exploitation within a male-dominated society. Particularly vulnerable were women from marginalized communities, such as Dalits and Muslims, who faced compounded discrimination. They were frequently excluded from protection by dominant groups, including Hindus and Sikhs, and left to

navigate violence and alienation alone. In many cases, higher-caste women were coerced into dying “honourable” deaths—often through suicide—to preserve their chastity and familial prestige. The concept of purity was so rigid that even women rescued from abduction were denied reintegration with their families, deemed “polluted” or “impure.” This widespread violence was perpetuated not only by individual men, but also by the family, the community, and the state—all of whom failed to safeguard women during the crisis. Women became symbolic targets of national and religious identity, reduced to the status of the “secondary sex” in a patriarchal society. Gendered politics turned Partition into a horrific ordeal for women, who were disproportionately affected by its brutal consequences. Their suffering stemmed not from personal wrongdoing, but from their existence as the “other”—used as instruments to uphold male honour and subjected to violence in a deeply patriarchal order.

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