



## Cultural and Sexual Violence on Women: Reading Sidhwa's *Cracking India*

Mani Bhadra Gautam

Central Department of Education, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Nepal

Email: [gautammanibhadra@yahoo.com](mailto:gautammanibhadra@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

The traumatic history of the partition violence of 1947-48 reveals the causes and consequences of religious conflict among Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. People biased the social and socio-cultural activities of another religious group and practiced taking revenge against each-other's religion that finally proved as a cause to divide the nation. The power exercise took side of the gender politics that victimized the women. Pain and suffering of women is emanating from the cases of abduction, seduction, rape and conversion of women of different ages including widows and teenagers from the sides of Hindu-Sikh on the one hand and Muslims on the other hand. Lack of cultural consciousness and the sexual violence, for instance, parading, mutilating, disfiguring, tattooing or branding and amputating the breasts knifing open the womb, raping and killing, of course, are shocking not only for its savagery, but for what it tells us about women as objects in the male constructed society as it is done from whatever the cultural community that belongs to. The violence suffered the people of each-other community but targeted the women more from both the communities as Sikhs seem much closer to the Hindu than the Muslims. A gender based revision of the history of partition of India foregrounds female victimhood and critiques the recovery and rehabilitation operation. Thus this study centers on feminist study with the theoretical support of Aparna Basu, Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, and Urbashi Butalia.

**Keywords:** *savagery, disfiguring, cultural community, consciousness, rehabilitation*

### Introduction

The history of 1947 has ignored the dislocation of human lives, the loss, trauma, pain and violence people suffered that targeted to take the revenge on and against the women body. The traumatic history of women victimization and partition violence 1947-48 reveals the causes and consequences of cultural and sexual suffering emanating from the cases of abduction, seduction, rape and conversion of women to different cultural communities. Some specific features of 'communal' crimes against women are their brutality and extreme sexual violence as they have tattoos of the teeth and nails on the breasts. The sexual violence, for instance, parading, mutilating, disfiguring, tattooing or branding and amputating the breasts knifing open the womb, raping and killing, of course are shocking not only for its savagery, but for what it tells us about women treated as an objects in the male constructed society and so the feminist writers like Aparna Basu, Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, and Urbashi Butalia raise questions to the male practices of that time.

Menon and Bhasin critique, "Women's sexuality symbolizes 'manhood'; its description is a matter of such shame and dishonour that has to be avenged. Yet, with the cruel logic of all such violence, it is women ultimately who are most violently dealt with consequently (*Borders* . . . 43). Savagery male attempts on women bodies dig out the hidden secrecies of painful history of partition period that unburies the buried events and incidents in textbook history that must be excavated through re-visioning or rewriting the elided history. In this regard, Aparna Basu asserts:

When women were forcibly abducted, sold, raped or remarried, they suffered unimaginable cruelty and humiliation. Having been uprooted from their families and familiar surroundings, they had to struggle hard to recover a sense of continuity in their lives. Crossing a border meant that they had to reconstruct their lives in new circumstances and in alien culture. The remaking of the self must have been a traumatic experience. (272)

The savagery attack with humiliation of an abduction, seduction and rape of the women beings traumatic experiences to the women that cannot be adjusted easily even after the unwanted and forced re- marriage or putting them into the rehabilitation

centre. Bedeviled lives of uprooted women are more painful and violent than the others.

Uprooted women's families and relatives do not accept the women easily and put them under the humiliation as they are among the boundary of the community people, too. Basu says, ". . . sometimes they were sent as gifts to friends and acquaintances" (272). Such painful events and incidents are taken as unforgettable humiliation of those women whose body is treated like an object kept on the market for sale. The event brought the bad practice in the society because the abducted woman has either to suicide or has to "live with a man who may have killed her husband, brother, or father but she had no option" (273). In the communal crimes many male are killed, women are abducted, seduced, raped- devalued as helpless creature and they are forced to re-marry. They are humiliated, harassed sexually and proved helpless who have no alternative of accepting for spending the life with that victimizer. The abductor do not have any sense of guilt in such abduction because he takes pride in taking revenge by abducting her whose people had killed the members of his community. Basu's question is that why the punishment is to the women as the crimes are committed by the men as whatever cultural community they belong to.

Menon and Bhasin write in support of Basu in the same line to raise the questions to this male structured society. They cite some lines from Bacchetta and write, "the violence was premised on the masculine's alignment of scales: female bodies were equated with notions of home, their respective religious 'communities', nations and national territories" (Bacchetta 571). Hence, they note that women's bodies are treated as territory to be conquered and they attempt to make their own playground. Moreover, the revisionist criticisms, especially written by feminist historians have brought to light the unprecedented violence on women. A violent political game had been played on their body as they are kidnapped and raped disfiguring their bodies and tattooing in the faces--a game that remains unrepresented in the textbook history and it should be re-written from cultural cum sexual perspectives. In this regard, Beerendra Pandey supports the revisionist vision, "During the bloody partition of India in 1947, which had taken on the proportions of a war, at least one hundred thousand women are said to have

been abducted and raped by all the three parties involved Muslims, Hindu and Sikhs (*The Atlantic* 105).

Partition for Menon and Bhasin, is "a watershed event" because it killed massive populations, particularly women ("Abducted" 1). Such a massive violence remains absent in history. It, however, has got coverage in fiction, which "assimilates[s] the enormity of the experience" (2). Menon and Bhasin argue that along with literary fragments, memories and testimonies of the victimized women should be included in the history of 1947 or it should be rewritten from gender cum cultural perspectives. Familial violence whereby husbands killed their raped wives and fathers killed their raped daughters for the sake of family honour as they are forced by the cultural barrier that is completely out of the history book. The events included in the history are very painful and they relate to the violence perpetrated on the women body, particularly in the case of abduction and the recovery.

The recovery and rehabilitation operation turned out to be violent for women as their mental torture cannot be recovered by the physical replacement in livelihood. In the feminist historiography, the discourse of the State is interrogated and challenged to the treat of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim women differently as their culture and religious beliefs with socio-cultural rigidity. Muslims did not accept the victimised women as easily as Hindus accepted. Hindu people are somehow liberal in comparison to the Sikhs and Muslims in the case of family love, care of their wives and sisters and they are liberal in the cases of their recovery and re-store in their homes or in the rehabilitation centers. According to Aparna Basu, the State's interrogated and challenged phenomenon on these women's acceptance and rejection issues turned to the matter of economic factor. In this regard, Basu quotes Kamlaben Patel's interview:

Hindu women were often accepted by their families because of economic failure. People had come from Pakistan as refugees and had no money with them to spend there. They did not have a woman to do the housework- a housewife. But there was a woman available. So forgetting everything, they took her. They accepted them out of helplessness, not broadmindedness. (Basu 276)

Basu takes it as a business and financial matter whereas Hindus are shown to be financially weak for modern means for survival that is not only the humiliation of the women but challenged the identity of all the Hindus whether they are male or female. Financial transactions in the recovery and rehabilitation operation of abducted women rather transmitted with the pain and suffering, whereas Gandhi appealed at the idea that "women could be bought, and made a reference to this in a post-prayer speech: some goondas came forward to bring back the girls if they are paid Rs 1,000 per girl" (276). This, financial motive turned towards the bad transaction that helped to the unjust exchange of victimised women from the camps. In regard to the unjust exchange of the women in camps, Basu writes:

Truck after truck started arriving at 8: 00 P.M., carrying women and children who looked more like skeletons than human beings. They said that they had not eaten properly for six months or more. They had been given a diet of one dry *chapati* a day and no salt in their food. They could bath only once a fortnight, and no soap or oil was provided. Their hair and bodies were covered with lice and ulcers. They had not been given any water to drink during a journey of 190 kilometers from Kurja camp to Lahore. (277)

The news of exchange of these women was made like transport of the things from one geographical location to the other that suffered 'anxious relatives' and they started arriving in search of their lost sisters, wives and daughters. However, the recovery and rehabilitation work was proceeding rather slowly. As an inter-dominion agreement was signed on November 11, 1948 in between India and Pakistan for the recovery of abducted persons, it came into the act after December 28, 1949.

According to the interviews given by them--the recovered victims were not only abducted, seduced and raped; but also the women were sexually abused and sold. In this regard, Menon and Bhasin write:

Some changed hands several times or were sold to the highest or lowest bidder as the case might be; some became second or third wives; and very, very many were converted and married and lived with considerable dignity and respect. A Sikh school teacher we met had spent six months with a Muslim neighbour in Muzaffarabad after the October 1947 raid, before she crossed over safety to Srinagar; her younger sister who had been abducted could never be located, despite sustained efforts by the family and the International Red Cross. ("Abducted" 10-11) Thousands of the innocent women's lives are in misery after the cultural practice, religious revenge and the sexual violence on women; however, the majority of the women recovered are rehabilitated in the greater or smaller measure or restored to their families. However, quite a few of the recovered women turned out to be permanent refugees. Most of those who turned out to be permanent refugees were those who had become pregnant and there was a grave problem after the child birth not only about the financial management but also about the naming of the newly born baby of whose, who the father is? They were unacceptable to the family and the society, even though the government wanted to rehabilitate them. Women whose babies were born in Pakistan after partition would have to leave them behind, but those whose children were born in India, would be accepted as Indian citizens and the baby of a Hindu.

In the feminist intervention, the violence on women has been treated within the framework of subaltern female subjectivity. Veena Das, for example, suggests that partition violence fell mainly on women who were economically victimised most. In Das's re-description, the violence on women from the discourses of the family, the community and the nation is undone; she writes about the gendered violence back into the discourses. In what she virtually calls collusion among the family, the community and the nation, a veil of silence has been thrown around the abduction and rape of thousands of women.

Traumatic history of partition violence in India reveals the unraveling pain and suffering regarding the cases of abduction, seduction, rape and conversion of women in different ages including widows and teenagers. Such a painful history unburies the buried events and incidents, especially relating the burning battle of 1947 A. D., in the duel of Hindustan and Pakistan whereas the women were victimized most. Regarding the issues, certain critical remarks in the partition history of India are made and described within the framework of female trauma. Among these critical remarks Veena Das in *Critical Events* explores the fragmentary issues to give a brief description of each event on the nature of an objective experience having organised discourses on India by revisiting an old controversy between Hindustan and Pakistan. Relating the issues of partition violence of 1947 A. D, Veena Das remarks it as an unraveling of pain and

suffering (27). Partition of India into two countries--India and Pakistan--is the sexual and reproductive violence to which women were subjected in the politics of sexuality that became the birth mark of two new nations. However, about the constructions of the communities as political actor, Das examines the discourses on cultural rights; the control over memory and women rights in the community to demand the heroic deaths from its members in the well-known cases of women in certain traumatic experiences.

Like Veena Das, Urvashi Butalia also remarks that the State had to redefine the notions of female purity in the wave of the rejection of female victims by the natal families that had consigned them to oblivion. Since 1984 when the Delhi riots traumatised the survivors, they have begun to recollect their memories:

The stories of the trauma and pain of Partition, the violence that it brought, had heard all my life that started me on this search? Was it the film I worked on for some friends which brought me in touch with Partition survivors and began this trajectory for me? Or was it 1984, the years that brought the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination: the killing and maiming of thousands of Sikhs in Delhi, the violent upheaval and dislocation of their lives which recalled Partition with such clarity? Or was it all of these? I don't really know. Here, at any rate, is one beginning. Others, too, will surface somewhere in this narrative. (Butalia, "The Other Side" 23)

Butalia's observation on the partition focuses on the history of victimized women who had been recovered from their abductors. These people have, in interviews, told their personal narratives to social workers.

The testimonies provided by social workers are, however, insufficient and have been coloured by the interviewer's own subjectivity. When Butalia begins her investigations of the incidents of Thoa Khalsa in March 1947, she finds that the testimonies given by the survivors are coloured by their masculine subjectivity. She recounts the violent incident of Thoa Khalsa thus:

In Thoa Khalsa, some 90 women threw themselves into a well in order to preserve the 'sanctity' and 'purity' of their religion, and to avoid conversion. A small community of survivors from these villages in . . . and keeps alive the memory of these deaths by holding an ample remembrance service in the local Gurudwara, in which the implements of that week are recounted by survivors. The tales of the women's sacrifice occupy a prominent place in the ceremony. It is they who are seen to have upheld, by offering themselves up for death, and more particularly 'heroic' death, the 'honour' of the community. ("Community" 37)

Some women lived happily as they have forgotten the things that regard partition pain and suffering. Their actions are thus located into the comfortable symbolic realm of sacrifice for the community, victimhood and even non-violence. Thoa Khalsa incident, according to Butalia, testifies to the valorization of one kind of violence during partition, which, as she discussed in the previous section, continues to be lionized today via the memorial rituals performed in Gurudwaras.

The records of abduction, conversion, forced migration, purification, naked women's parade, mass raping and killings and the local records of *purushartha*, where hundreds of people

became the victims of communal violence, and innumerable others like the 'rumours?' of train raids, mass-massacres, can also provide very good source for re-writing the history of partition. It is Pandey's argument that these should not be allowed to be drowned in the din of a statistic historiography ("Voices" 226).

Hence, Butalia asserts that the partition pain remained long even after the "first and second generation" (31). Even after the time span of partition violence, the pain perpetrated against women remained long on their minds, constantly. However, they lived happily as they have forgotten the things that regard partition pain and suffering. The pain and trauma of partition specifically reminds not only the questions of the State authority, but also the questions of identity. As far as the Indian State was concerned, women were defined in terms of their religious identities, an unusual stance for a supposedly secular state to take. The women, however, saw themselves differently--as members of a community, as Sikh or Hindu, or Muslim as mothers, as women--and acted upon these different identities. But these experiences are seldom able to get an entertainment for forgetting the realms of pain and suffering, and are to be found in fictional memories. Yet, according to Butalia, "people choose to remember certain things depicting on who they are, how they are placed their class, their economic and political circumstances" (33). Butalia says that the oral history should be a part of the complex construction of the whole authority to the history what is not included in the textbook history of the partition violence.

The sexual violence on women was premised on equating with notions of home, community and nationhood: "Thus geopoliticised, women were dualistically positioned as either 'ours' or 'theirs' and, accordingly, encoded as sites for masculinist protection or destruction" (571). In this geopoliticised violence on women, rape was the most preferred weapon because rape symbolically renders docile her community or nation through forced penetration of her body with enemy's penis. In this regard, Beerendra Pandey remarks: "mass rape is directed at making the victims hate the rapists so much that the minority community thinks in their interest to migrate permanently" (107). Tattooing and branding the women victims at the time of partition violence in 1947 with 'Pakistan Zindabad!' or 'Hindustan Zindabad!' permanently mark them as appropriated by the enemy.

Women or children who were claimed by a close relatives in India, could be handed over to their relatives only at Jullundur, in the presence of a magistrate . . . an action that brought the recovery of women squarely within the disciplinary power of the State. The exchange of recovered women from both dominions was roughly equal of the total women recovered, "Of the total women recovered, girls below the age of twelve from Pakistan and India were 45 percent and 35 percent respectively. In the age group 12 to 35, the recovery was 49 percent in Pakistan and 59 percent in India, while the percentage drops to about 10 for women older than 35 years" (Das 69). This statement clearly shows that national honour was strongly tied to the regaining of control over the sexual and reproductive functions of women.

The personal narratives of the survivor victims, however, put a grave question mark over the State's action. In some of the family narratives that Das has collected the dishonor of being abducted by unknown men, however, if the law did not recognize these marriages, the women become legally redefined

as abducted women, and over them the State had now acquired a right: the rules made for them and to their own relatives. Even if a natural attachment had developed between the abductor and the abducted woman did not recognize such marriages. Therefore, a woman could continue to stay with her abductor only as a prostitute and a concubine, while her children could only remain in the country as illegitimate offspring who could be a standing blot on the light of Hindu society.

### **Conclusion**

In the light of the feminist reading on cultural and sexual violence done on women body with the then practice of 1947-48 by the religious cum cultural communities of the Hindu, Sikh and Muslims this article suggests to rewrite the India-Pakistan history from feminist perspective. Feminist reading of Sidhwa's *Cracking India* questions on causes, consequences and circumstances of partition violence and women victimization. Menon and Bhasin raise some pertinent questions regarding the gendered violence from a feminist perspective. Moreover, they evaluate the State's responsibility to the refugees in general and women refugees in particular, as articulated in the policies and programmes of the government. The issues of identity politics unravel the complex post-colonial state with religious communities in the aftermath of communal conflict that helps to re-write the partition history from the side of feminist historiography.

### **References**

- Bacchetta, Paola. "Interrogating Partition Violence: Voices of Women/Children/ Dalits in India's Partition." *Feminist Studies*. 26.3 (2000): 567-584.
- Basu, Aparna. "Uprooted Women: Partition of Punjab 1947." *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*. Ed. Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhary. Indiana UP, 1998. 270-286.
- Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Duke UP, 2000.
- Das, Veena. *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. OUP, 2002.
- Ghosh, K. Tapan. *The Commonwealth Review*. Ed. R. K. Dhawan, Summa Bala et. al. Prestige, 15. 1, 1962.
- Kudchedkar, Shirin and Sabiha Al-Issa. *Violence against Women: Women against Violence*. D. K. Fine Arts, 1998.
- Menon, Ritu. "Women from Pakistan, India & Bangladesh Write on the Partition of India." *No Woman's Land*. Women Unlimited, 2004.
- Menon, Ritu and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. Rutgers UP, 1998.
- Mohanty, Manoranjan. *Readings in Indian Government and Politics: Class, Caste, Gender*. Sage, 2004.
- Pandey, Beerendra. "A Paradigm Shift in the Representation of Violence in Partition Short Stories by Women: Political Irony in Shauna Singh Baldwin's Family Ties." *The Atlantic Literary Review*. 5. 3. 4 (2004).
- Pandey, Gyanendra. *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*. CUP, 2001.

"Voices from the Edge: the Struggle to Write Subaltern Histories." *Ethnos* 60. 3-4 1995. 223- 242.

Sidhwa, Bapsi. *Cracking India: A Novel*. Milkweed Editions, 1991.