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Anna k. Poole

Kennesaw State University, apoole37@students.kennesaw.edu

Ryan Ronnenberg

Kennesaw State University, rryan4@kennesaw.edu

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Honor, Violence, and Recovery: The Stripping of Female Agency During the Partition of India

**Anna K. Poole and Ryan Ronnenberg (Faculty Advisor)
Kennesaw State University**

Abstract

In 1943, the partition of India sent thousands of people on a perilous journey over geographical and religious lines. While this time period was marked by heartache for all, women were specifically affected, as societal ideals made them targets for brutality, kidnapping, and forced conversion. This paper analyzes the treatment of women during partition and effects of recovery efforts which took place after the year 1943. By utilizing firsthand accounts, interviews, and the works of other historians on this time period, it posits that recovery became an extension of maltreatment that reinforced the patriarchal ideals that made women victims to begin with.

Keywords: Partition, female autonomy, recovery, honor

The 1947 partition of India and Pakistan was a time of migration, chaos, and violence on a scale previously unknown to either nation. The movement of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs across the newly formed borders of India and Pakistan led to violence between religious groups that resulted in thousands of deaths. In much of this chaos, women faced the brunt of violence as the role of gender and concept of female honor made them targets for destruction and insult from one group to another. Women were subjected to rape, mutilation, and kidnapping by men as an attack on the opposing religion. The unspeakable atrocities committed against women on every side exploited females and, in many cases, ripped them from their homes as they were forced to marry their abusers and convert their religious standings. These abductions were followed by recovery efforts that, in many situations, only worked to further religious and familial divisions for the women involved. The consequential trauma resulted in a lack of acknowledgement of women's stories, historical amnesia about the violence they were subjected to, and

reiteration of patriarchal and oppressive stigmas that led to the initial violence. The governments of India and Pakistan made efforts to recover women who had been abducted during partition. However, rather than restoring their honor and reconnecting them with their families and communities, their efforts served to further violate their lives and once again strip them of personal agency, reducing them to their religious identities and resulting in generational trauma for both women and their children.

In the chaos that ensued from Great Britain's removal from India, women and young girls faced wide scale violence and victimization due to societal and religious ideals of honor. Female value and the foundation for integrity in their society were made up of chastity, devotion, and reproductive abilities. Such ideals made women themselves the battlefield on which much of the religious conflict of partition was fought. To bring disgrace on the community to which they belonged, women were raped, mutilated, paraded down the street naked,

and had their breasts cut off and bodies carved into with the symbols of opposing religions. As is often the case for women of marginalized communities, rape and violence became a tool of subjugation, used to reinforce social hierarchies and differentiation.¹ With no respect for their personhood, women were “reduced to their bodies, carrying the burden of the honor of the community, to be conquered, claimed or marked to attack that ‘honor.’”² This brutality, however, was not limited to men of differing religions. It extended to the kin, husbands, and community members of women as well. Fear of the stigma and dishonor that accompanied a woman being taken advantage of drove men to kill their wives and daughters either themselves or by coercing them to commit suicide.³ While a number of women chose to kill themselves as an act of preservation and personal agency, many deaths and coerced suicides served only to further the patriarchal ideas of honor, which shackled women to victimization. It

was not the protection of women men sought through these actions, but rather the assurance that the male family member’s sense of honor would remain unscathed.⁴ The rape, mutilation, and murder of women all ultimately sprang from the social ideal of honor that was placed on them by their society like a target on their backs.

Engendered violence against women ultimately led to forced marriage, conversion, and abduction by the men who sought to sully their opposing communities. In doing so, men attempted to use women as a way to assert which religion and gender held supremacy. As a result, it is approximated that seventy-five thousand women were abducted during partition.⁵ Some believe this number is even higher, placing estimates at fifty thousand Muslim women in India and thirty-three thousand non-Muslims in

1. Deepa Prajith and M. Shanthi, “Glocal Flows: A Study of Bell Hooks’ Aint I a Woman in the Indian Context,” *IUP Journal of English Studies* 17, no. 4 (2022): 09733728.

²2. Naresh Kumar, “Rehabilitation of Woman During Partition,” *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 5 (2021): 4172, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=eue&AN=160600691&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=ken1>.

3. Urvashi Butalia, “Community, State, and Gender: On Women’s Agency During Partition,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 17 (1993): WS24, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4399641>

4. Amritjit Singh, Nalini Iyer, and Rahul K. Gairola, *Revisiting India’s Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture, and Politics* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016), 17, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=nlebk&AN=1240020&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=ken1>.

5. Tina Belinda Benigno, “Mother and the Child in the Partition of British India (1947) and the Anti-Sikh Pogrom in and Surrounding Delhi (1984),” *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 16, no. 4 (2020): 412, doi:10.1080/17448727.2020.1741182.

Pakistan.⁶ This multitude of Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh women faced a variety of fates, including being forcibly married by their abductors, sold into prostitution, or being traded from hand to hand. Many of them simply went missing, never to be seen again.

Some women were taken from their families alone while others were taken out of their villages in droves. A Punjab government document from the time contains a statement from the then twenty-four-year-old Singh Bedi, the son of a State Jagirdar and chief of the Punjab. Bedi recounts his memory of the abduction of hundreds of Hindu women and girls from the village Dhadial on November 30, 1947. He recalls Muslim military men opening fire on their town and killing many civilians before placing survivors in rooms and locking them up. He then tells that men would visit the rooms at night, taking away married and unmarried women alike and returning them in the morning. They were marched six miles to a camp as men selected and forcibly took women away, among whom were Bedi's three sisters-in-law. Many women threw themselves in wells along the way to avoid abduction but, in the end, he recounts that about three hundred were taken from them.⁷ Hundreds of women from each religion were torn from their families and homes in situations much like Bedi's, while those they cared for were forced to watch helplessly. Thrown into new identities, a large portion of

these women went on to have children, raise families, and be integrated into the communities of their new husbands. As families began to report their missing women to file complaints to the police, it became apparent that the state would have to step in. The issue was so wide scaled that neither the government of India nor Pakistan attempted to deny the abductions, and each conceded to set plans in place to retrieve misplaced women in the other's territory.

To reconcile the extreme violence and abductions which took place during partition, the governments of India and Pakistan launched initiatives to recover women who had been forcefully converted, displaced, or abducted after the year 1947. They began by compiling lists of women who had been reported missing as a basis for their search. However, the lists were difficult to organize as a single woman could be reported missing multiple times by differing family members across the region. They also possessed no system for sharing and assembling this data effectively, resulting in no one account being fully reliable.⁸ The continued growth of the lists prompted the governments to move forward in recovery efforts on a larger scale. By September of 1947, Pandit Jawaharla Nehru and Liaquat Ali Khan, the prime ministers of India and Pakistan, had convened at Lahore and established a joint declaration proclaiming that neither government would recognize forced

6. Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Minon. "Recovery, Rupture, Resistance: Indian State and Abduction of Women During Partition," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 17 (1993): WS-4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4399640>.

7. Shyamal Kataria, "Liaison Agency Records, Punjab Government Vol. 1 – LV/1/52-VII – Acc No. 1405," in "Evolution of the Sikh Partition Narrative since 1947," *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 17, no. 3 (2021): 336, doi:10.1080/17448727.2021.1939509.

8. Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000), 110.

conversions or marriages that had taken place during partition, and women and girls who had been taken from their families must be restored to them. The governments made it clear they would make every effort to “trace and recover” the women and girls who had been abducted.⁹ This decision would go on to be reinforced through the Inter-Dominion Treaty, made in December of 1947, which bestowed executive strength to the nullification of forced marriages and power to repossess the women within them.¹⁰

In 1949, the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, a pivotal document for the recovery effort, was created as an agreement between India and Pakistan and pertained to the recovery of those who had been abducted during partition. The act defined an “abducted person” as:

A male child under the age of sixteen years or a female of whatever age who is, or immediately before the 1st day of March, 1947, was, a Muslim and who, on or after that day and before the 1st day of January, 1949, has become separated from his or her family and is found to be living with or under the control of any other individual or family, and in the latter case includes a child born to any such female after the said date.¹¹

With this definition in place, the document outlined the intent of the provincial government to recover said persons and the

steps that would be taken to reintegrate them into their former communities. It called for the establishment of camps for the “reception and detention” of women and children who were removed from their homes and needed a transitional place before being returned to their original religious territory.¹² It also gave the police full autonomy in discerning the status of an abducted person within a home and allowed them to take whatever steps seemed reasonable and necessary to retrieve that person or persons. This freedom was a source of contention, as many blamed the police for much of the initial violence and abductions of women. Despite this, the act outlined that no legal proceedings could be taken against the central government, provincial government, or officer pertaining to actions that had been done in good faith and in accordance with the Abducted Persons Act. In response to this document, it is estimated that thirty thousand Muslim and non-Muslim women were recovered by both India and Pakistan over a period of eight years. The majority of these recoveries took place within the years 1947 to 1952, although the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act was renewed in India every year until 1957, and women were being located and returned to the two countries as late as 1965, nearly two decades after partition.¹³

Women were offered as little choice in their recovery as they had been in their abductions. Rather than acknowledge that

9. U. Bhaskar Roe, *The Story of Rehabilitation*, Department of Rehabilitation, Ministry of Labor, Employment and Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1967, 30.

10. Bhasin, *Recovery*, WS-4.

11. Indian Legislature. *Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, 1949*. (1940), 1.

12. Indian Legislature, *Abducted Persons*, 2.

13. Bhasin, *Recovery*, WS-7.

many women had established themselves into their new communities, the Indian and Pakistani governments sought to reinforce what they considered to be the legitimate family by deconstructing the illegitimate ones. They attempted to do so by removing the women, wives, and mothers these families were made up of. To justify this removal, they had to represent the women as violated and humiliated, stripping them, once again, of any right to assert agency in the rebuilding of their lives and identities. Departing from neutrality, the state ascribed value to the “legitimate” family at the expense of female autonomy, declaring that their post partition marriages were not to be acknowledged. A bill, introduced in the Indian Legislative Assembly on July 16, 1949, contained a clause stating that all marriages which had taken place post conversion would be considered null and void.¹⁴ The clause caused much debate, especially as it made no allowances for marriages which had been performed with the consent of the woman. It also raised concern pertaining to the procedure that would be enacted in response to abductees who had reconciled to their new environments and did not wish to be returned to their families. Despite resentment towards such unlimited power given to the presiding governments over recovery cases, the verdict was made final and unable to be challenged in court.¹⁵ Thousands of women, having first been violated and forced into matrimony with their aggressors, were now told that those marriages and resulting families were illegitimate. The result would be the reopening of partition wounds as they were ripped from their homes, placed in refugee

camps, and returned to communities which had long since forgotten or rejected them due to their experiences.

Rather than restoring honor to the women who had suffered violence and abduction, recovery efforts, more often, worked to further impose patriarchal concepts onto women’s lives and strip them of their personal agency. Thousands of women who had worked to create a place and purpose for themselves and their children in new communities suddenly found themselves, once again, uprooted against their will and ripped from their homes in the name of honor. It was not their personal honor, however, that recovery sought to protect. Rather, the retrieval of displaced women was an opportunity for the state to retaliate against offenses committed by the opposing nation, and women’s feelings towards such salvation were anything but welcoming.

As they began the process of recovery, government and social workers often found their charges to be hostile and resistant. Tahira Mazhar Ali, one such social worker, immersed herself in the task of identifying abducted women and accompanying them to camps or their countries of religious origins. She told of the difficulty of attempting to relocate women due to the shame and stigma of having been raped and kidnapped. She recalled approaching women in order to return them to their “rightful” homes, only to find they did not wish to return to their families for the

14. Rachna Mehra, “A Nation partitioned or Homes Divided? The Severed Relationship Between the State, Community, and Abducted Women in the Post Partition Period,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 73 (2012): 1396, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/441563> 42.

15. Mehra, *A Nation Partitioned*, 1396

sheer shame they felt over their abductions.¹⁶ Still others did not want to be recovered because they had assimilated into their new communities and were well settled in the homes in which they were currently living. Ali's testimony, and others like it, highlight the disconnect between government ideals for recovery and the realities of locating, removing, and transporting women back to their "true" homes. While the state's official stance on recovery may have been to repossess women and return them to where they belonged, recovery in practice instead led to the reiteration of female shame and disregard of their personal desires.

One anonymous woman, who worked both as a social worker and the superintendent of Gandhi Vanita Ashram, Jalandhar, an all-girls school and refugee camp established in Punjab, India in 1948, recalled her time in the field. She recounted a memory from 1950 in which she was employed to escort twenty-one recovered Muslim women from India to Pakistan. To her surprise, the young girls, who had been taken by Sardars, protested and wept, saying they did not wish to return because they were very happy with their husbands. Despite their resistance, the girls were made to leave by force. Outraged by their removal, the social worker recalled that they cursed her throughout the journey, repeatedly asking "Why are you destroying our lives? Who are you to meddle in our lives? We don't know you, what business is it of yours."¹⁷ The girls' family members followed the recovery team in hopes that, if one of the girls escaped, they would be able to take them home, but their

efforts were to no avail. After the girls' arrival in Pakistan, where they were delivered to a camp for recovered Muslims located in a Women's penitentiary, she recalls her pity at seeing how wretched the women there were. In leaving the twenty-one girls, she could feel only sorrow for their "helplessness—what else can you call it? It was complete helplessness, they had been transferred from one set of butchers ('kasais') to another... what could they do?"¹⁸ Knowing how much they had already suffered, it was no consolation to see the women "recovered" from their difficult circumstances. For those who experienced recovery firsthand, it became merely the leading of sheep to their final slaughter, in hopes of saving face for the butchers themselves.

As the twenty-one Muslim girls posed the fateful questions "why are you destroying our lives? Who are you to meddle in [them]?" they were issuing a challenge, not only to the social worker, but to the state itself. The governments of both India and Pakistan had lost all credibility in their capacity to protect women from the violence and displacement that had already occurred during partition. By failing to prevent such atrocities on the forefront, both governments had forfeited any legitimate claim they may have once had to be involved in the lives of the affected women. Such women, having been let down to the highest degree in 1947, did not wish for the same government to assert its hand into their newly achieved semblance of normalcy. With anger and distrust, they asked "if you were unable to save us then, what right have

16. Pippa Virdee, "Remembering Partition: Women, Oral Histories and the Partition of 1947," *Oral History* 41, no. 2 (2013): 55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23610424>.

17. Bhasin, *Recovery*, WS-5.

18. Bhasin, *Recovery*, WS-6.

you to compel us now?"¹⁹ For most, recovery simply reinforced the cycle of chaos they had been thrust into at the onset of partition. Their men having been killed, homes destroyed, and lives tossed into a constant state of breakdown and reconstruction, the freedom attained through partition became little more than a life sentence of victimization for the women of India and Pakistan.

In many cases, women did not want to be recovered and their families did not want to reintegrate the women into their lives. Such women were relegated to refugee camps that had been hastily established throughout the two countries. In their purest forms, these camps and monasteries, often called ashrams, were meant to provide a transitional place for refugees and recovered women and children to live during the process of reconnecting them with their families. Too often, however, they became a holding tank for those who did not have family to go back to or whose relatives could not afford to support them. These women were labeled "unattached" and considered the responsibility of the government.²⁰ Often illiterate and with few skills to support themselves, ashrams became their final plunge into the margins of society. For women who did have relations to return to, camps still often became permanent due to their family's rejection or their own refusal to return to their kin. Seeing their recovered relatives as polluted, many families refused to accept the women back into their lives, choosing instead to disregard the women entirely. Such rejections meant that

thousands of women remained unclaimed. With nowhere else to go, ashrams continued to house the displaced as late as 1997, fifty years after independence and partition.²¹ Stripped from one family and rejected by another, they belonged nowhere and could do little to advance their status as charges of the government. Other women, however, made the decision to remain in the ashrams rather than return to homes or to families that had already abandoned them once. They preferred instead to maintain the comparative autonomy afforded to them in the camps and to remain obscure for the remainder of their lives rather than to be reunited with an estranged family.²² Taken from their post partition lives and faced with the lack of family or rejection from those they were meant to return to, women were often relegated to a state of limbo in which temporary camps became permanent homes. Such condemnation was often the final tightening grip of a state that would discard its women to a life of obscurity within its grasp before releasing them to the lives they had created outside their reach.

The upheaval of recovery efforts was not limited to the lives of abducted women but extended to the children born of their current marriages who were also relegated to removal by the state. While the Abducted Persons Act included children born to women who had been abducted before 1949 as "abducted persons," their official declaration as such did nothing to mend the feelings of communities and families who viewed them as physical reminders of their shame. To the

19. Bhasin, *Recovery*, WS-6.

20. Kumar, *Rehabilitation of Women*, 4172.

21. Amritjit, *Revisiting India's Partition*, 15.

22. Bhasin, *Recovery*, WS-6.

mothers themselves, their post-abduction children were often the articulation of the violence and humiliation they dared not speak about. Despite this, women became emotionally attached to their children and did not wish to leave them in order to be recovered.²³ While some women were forced to leave behind their offspring, many children were uprooted along with their mothers, subjecting them to being religious outcasts or to endure life in refugee camps. This rejection sprung from the belief that abducted children were born of two religions and could, therefore, be accepted fully by neither. Thus, while mothers might be reintegrated into the former belief system and reconciled to their families, the case for their children was not as straightforward. The arrival of post-abducted children subjected mother and child alike to unacceptance and disdain from community members and kin determined to ascribe to them the sins of their fathers. Taken from home, family, and religion, recovered children represented the generational effects of recovery and upheaval created by the government asserting itself into the lives of its people.

The events which took place against women in partition resulted in collective distress for the women, children, and community as well as trauma for individuals. While these effects can be generalized as a whole, the fact remains that lasting results and individual impact varied from person to person. Ron Eyerman, in his book on African American identity, defines these differing results by separating them into two forms of

trauma. He states that psychological or physical trauma is that “which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual” while cultural trauma is “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion.”²⁴ When mass upheaval, such as the engendered violence, abduction, and recovery which was inflicted on women, takes place within a group of people, such trauma occurs on both levels, resulting in the disruption of the very fabric of that community. Thus, those who lived through such violence each carried with them the individual trauma of their circumstances, defining how they personally moved forward and shared their stories, while also sharing the collective trauma, which helped shape how the thousands of women attempted to reconcile these experiences. It is this individual and collective trauma that has shaped how partition memory has been formed for future generations and that bonds the women together with a common thread. Their stories, memories, and feelings in and about the violence they endured form both a personal and group identity that perhaps only they themselves can ever fully understand. As history attempts to remember and reconcile these events, the impact of these traumas is “linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory.”²⁵

Not only did migration, abduction, and recovery leave affected women with trauma stemming from violence and

23. Benigno, *Mother and the Child*, 417.

24. Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: slavery and the formation of African American identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

25. Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*, 1.

displacement, but it permanently skewed their understanding of home and their ability to identify with a specific place or community. The idea that their understanding of home could have changed with their abduction was not taken into consideration as displaced women were forced to leave their post partition lives. Rather than enjoying a welcomed homecoming, women were once again ripped from their surroundings and plunged into unacceptance and shame. Oral histories of women shed light on this dissociation of home through the stories of those who experienced it. Sralaji, a Hindu woman, told her story, remembering the loss of her home in Ferozpur, Punjab and her journey to Delhi. She admitted, when speaking about partition, that she is “noncommittal,” as she has no pleasant memories from that time to share. After eventually settling in Delhi with her husband, she said that, though she had no affection for Delhi, she never wished to return to Ferozpur because it was not like it was before partition.²⁶ The pre-partition homes women were taken from were not places they could ever hope to return to. Their homes had been taken from them on both a physical and psychological level. The changed circumstances of their lives and countries as a whole meant the permanent loss of any community they had known. Another woman named Poonamji recalled her time spent in a refugee camp as a time when she was given the greatest autonomy only because she did not live in a true home.²⁷ Rather than a place of security, the concepts of home and family formed an oppressive system in which attachment and connection were hard to create, as the women were subjected to

constant and nonconsensual change. With such great loss and violence surrounding them, abduction and recovery robbed women of any place or people they may once have felt they belonged to. Shunned by families and outcast by community, home was reduced to a memorialized space that no longer held a physical location. Women did not wish to return home because they no longer viewed the places they had come from as being their homes.

One major fault with the concept of home as defined by the state was that recovery efforts were designed around placing women in the location that corresponded to their origin religion rather than a physical location that held significance for them. They insisted that women living with men of differing religions must be returned to their “own homes,” a concept they took upon themselves to define. By doing so, they reduced a woman’s place of belonging to the physical country or place of the woman’s religion, defining them by little more than the faith they were born into. Therefore, the proper place for Hindu and Sikh women must be India and for Muslim women it must be Pakistan as these were the nations which housed those beliefs. Women, however, having been violated and outcast in the religious struggle to assert dominance, could define their community by a belief system no longer. For it had been religion which had deconstructed their lives in 1947 and it was not to be religion that mended it in the years that followed. Partition, in theory, allowed each citizen to choose which nation he or she desired to be a member of, yet for the thousands of women who were abducted

26. Devika Chawla, *Home Uprooted: Oral Histories of India’s Partition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 166.

27. Chawla, *Home Uprooted*, 169.

and recovered, that choice was revoked. The women were forced to comply with decisions made by their government as to their rightful home despite having forged new homes elsewhere.

A renowned account of recovery, passed down in partition history through memoirs and newspaper accounts, tells the story of a young Muslim girl named Zainab. Zainab was said to have been abducted while attempting to migrate to Pakistan and was eventually sold to a Jat from the Amritsar district named Buta Singh who married her. Over time, the two were said to have grown to love each other and went on to have a family. A few years after the partition, Zainab was found by a recovery search party who took her from her home as her village gathered to watch her go. After being separated from her husband and oldest child, she was returned to her kin who insisted upon her marrying her cousin and later ensured she reject Buta Singh when he came in search of his wife, ultimately resulting in his suicide.²⁸ This account, now legendary in partition history, is representative of female victimization which resulted from recovery efforts. Zainab, like thousands of women on both sides of the border, faced displacement, abduction, and the complete loss of agency in any aspect of her life. Yet, her story is reduced to that of a hero and a victim in which there is nothing told of how she felt or how her experiences marked her. Buta Singh, her husband, is made a hero. A man who, despite paying for and undoubtedly raping his wife, defines himself as a loving husband who was willing to give up everything for her, including his life upon finding her married to another. In wake of his heroism, Zainab is left only to play the victim. A

woman, ripped from her home and children, forced into two marriages, and given no voice to tell her portion of the story or to mourn her losses. The accounts, which are meant to tell her story, leave her utterly silent, as is so often the case for the women who lived through partition.

Women's ability to share their stories with those who came after them has been the final shred of agency to be grasped for in their personal partition narratives. Unable to dictate the course of their lives in that time, they should have, at a minimum, been able to dictate their legacy afterward, yet the memory of such events has been kept predominantly quiet. Historic amnesia for the violence which took place against women has been the result of this silence, furthering trauma for those who lived it. While attempting to compile an account of the female experience in partition, Urvashi Butalia wrote, "in order to be able to 'hear' women's voices, [we have] to begin to pose different questions, to talk in different situations, and to be prepared to do that most important of things, to listen: to their speech, their silences, the half-said things, the nuances."²⁹ When attempting to understand what the effects of female violence and recovery have been on both the people of India and Pakistan and the women who experienced it, it is important to acknowledge not only the lack of testimonies on the subject, but to consider the implications of this silence. The type of trials the women lived through dictated their unwillingness to share those stories. Women rarely spoke about their experiences in partition because they often believed they had nothing worthwhile to say. Men reinforced this belief and certainly did not speak much about

28. Butalia, *The Other Side*, 101-104.

29. Butalia, *Other Side of Silence*, 100.

women themselves. The same patriarchal honor and shame ideals which originally led to the engendered violence against women remained at work to keep them from sharing their trauma. This silence is telling of a “cultural system that dictates that rape signifies a woman’s shame and the dishonor of her male protectors.”³⁰

Attempts to hear the partition stories of women have been met with social conditioning that makes it difficult for such women to use any platform they are given. This social conditioning can hinder the ability to gather accounts of engendered violence and oral histories of female experiences during partition from the women who lived it. A woman named Fatima, who agreed to give an interview with Pippa Virdee about her life during partition, displayed this reluctance to speak despite having expressed a desire to share her story. Such reluctance can be attributed to two factors. First, Fatima’s brother, whom she lived with, insisted on being present for their conversation and Fatima believed his views were of greater importance than her own. Secondly, she did not feel she had his permission to speak about what she had been through. Upon hearing her brother murmuring in the background at her interview questions, Fatima told her interviewer, “Well now I don’t have permission to talk otherwise I could have explained everything.” When encouraged to continue, she shut down the conversation, dismissed her own agency, and validated that of her brothers by saying “what can I say? I don’t remember anything.”³¹ Pressure to be

quiet and the need for male approval to speak out has left women, such as Fatima, widely unrepresented in partition history. The marginalization of their voices is the final act of aggression against female autonomy to direct their lives and narratives in the name of male honor and values. When women are coerced into claiming they do not remember, it is future generations who suffer from society’s willingness to forget.

The task of sharing their stories was difficult, even for women who wished to do so, as the words necessary to convey their struggles automatically bring with them cultural stigmas. Any talk about sexual violence or religious conversion would be immediately linked with diction of dishonor and shame toward women and their families. Thus, details of rape, abduction, and recovery become glossed over and unverifiable because women did not possess the words necessary to speak of such things without opening themselves to criticism. Post partition history and literature display this gap in the histories of India and Pakistan. While a lack of female authors has contributed to the issue, the gap would be difficult to fill even if women were to step into a literary role as “they could hardly write the stories of their own dishonor and shame. The language for it has yet to be fashioned.”³² As a result, the female experience in partition has been subjected to a historic amnesia in which the fact that violence was committed towards them is acknowledged but the specific stories of their trials have become lost.

30. Alison Didur, *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 125, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=nlebk&AN=468679&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=ken1>.

31. Virdee, *Remembering Partition*, 59.

32. Didur, *Unsettling Partition*, 126.

For those who have chosen to share their experiences, they have often been subject to talk around violence and recovery, acknowledging only their life afterwards to avoid shame. A Punjabi woman, who was abducted by Muslims at the age of fifteen or sixteen, chose to share her story at the age of fifty-eight. This woman, who preferred only to be known as S, told that she had happily married a Pakistani police officer, had three children, and lived in Pakistan until 1957 when she and her children were forcibly recovered by the Indian government due to the insistence of her brother. Upon her return, she refused to see or speak to him, choosing instead to remain in the ashram where she worked and denied ever discussing her home in Pakistan other than to say she had been treated well and had not wished to leave. She went on to get a degree in the ashram and to teach at a local school where she eventually retired as headmistress. Of this time in her life, she spoke with pride, but when asked to share about her life during partition and before recovery, she absolutely refused saying, “what use is it recalling the past? Forget about it. I've banished it all from my mind. I lead a respectable, honorable, life now, why look back to the past even my children don't know anything about it. Nothing can be done about it now. It can't be resolved.”³³ Having grasped the agency offered by the ashram to stand on her own two feet, S rejected the ability to speak about her partition experiences even to her children because it did not fit into the “respectable, honorable” life she had built. In doing so, her story of recovery, like that of so many other women, was reduced to an impersonal blip in the narrative of violence toward women.

Social conditioning, cultural stigmas, and male dominance over female partition narratives ultimately resulted in the underrepresentation of survivor stories as focus was placed on women who lost their lives during partition chaos. While it cannot be denied that violence took place, the women who experienced it and lived to tell the tale are often forgotten and even overshadowed by those who did not. Many women were coerced into or willingly chose suicide as a way to save their honor and are often remembered as martyrs. Basant Kaur and her son Bir Bahadur Singh, both survivors of partition riots in Thoa Khalsa, shed light on survivor erasure and female martyrdom in their accounts of the mass suicide of ninety women who took their lives by jumping in a well. Bir Bhadur Singh condones the actions of these women by saying it was their sacrifice which allowed other women in the village to continue living honorably. His testimony signifies that, rather than life itself, the goal of survival for women was to avoid being “raped, perhaps abducted and further violated, [and] almost certainly converted” by the men who sought to harm them. It was seen as preferable for a woman to take her own life if this could not be avoided. A survivor of this incident, Basant Kaur recalls watching most of her family die, witnessing her husband behead their daughter in an assisted suicide, and even jumping into the well herself with over ninety other women to escape their Muslim aggressors. Not maintaining enough water to drown them all, Kaur and a handful of other women had to be pulled out. The single surviving woman of her family, Kaur shares her conviction that she must tell her stories, “Tell them and tell them until you lose consciousness.”³⁴ Yet, her son is surprisingly

33. Bhasin, *Recovery*, WS-6.

34. Butalia, *Other Side of Silence*, 160.

silent on the stories of his surviving mother in his interview. He favors the story of his sister's death, praising her courage and calling her a martyr for the Sikh religion with pride. Like so many women who survived traumatic partition experiences, Kaur's life is disregarded by her family, community, and history in favor of the women who took their lives in order to preserve their personal honor and that of their religion. By escaping death, Basant Kaur, and women like her, were deemed unimportant and erased from history. The martyrdom of those who died for religion and honor further represented the cultural disregard of their experiences for women who survived partition and endured the violence, abduction, and recovery that resulted from it. While death had made some women emblems of heroism, survival had reduced others to game pieces, first for the assertion of religious power during partition, then again for the reiteration of state power in recovery.

In the recent effort to unearth the stories of women during partition and to understand how violence and recovery from that time impacted their lives and culture, it is paramount to consider the way recovery and cultural stigmas stripped female agency and silenced their stories. The research and conclusions in this paper on such topics not only analyze why women were treated thus, but also the greater implications behind the lack of female voice in partition history. It is not enough that women have been given the opportunity in the past twenty years to share their stories. Understanding the female role in partition and the effects it had on their lives requires a broader understanding of pre-partition Indian culture and how that impacted the way in which female experiences were seen and understood until recent history. By considering the social ideals of honor, state recovery efforts, and the personal narratives of women who

experienced both, historians can begin returning a semblance of female agency to partition history.

Seventy-seven years after partition, activists are seeking new ways to shed light on the female experience. Modern activists have found that art can sometimes bring awareness to this part of history where words have failed. Pritika Chowdhry, an Indian-born American artist, writer, and curator, is the founder of the Partition Anti-Memorial and Counter Memory Project which focuses on how to memorialize unbearable histories. Two of her exhibits entitled *What the Body Remembers* and *Queering Mother India*, aim to push back against the historic erasure of the female partition experience. *What the Body Remembers* was created to embody the emotional, physical, and sexual trauma that Muslim and Hindu women experienced during partition. The minimalistic display consists of the naked female body suspended on a playground in various forms of play. The child likeness of the sculptures' actions contrasted with their incomplete forms and nakedness are meant to leave the viewer with a sense of unease and a hint at unseen violence. *Queering Mother India* depicts the country as a large, dismembered female body to challenge the traditional understanding of a nation as being masculine while the home is perceived as feminine. Mother India's body has been separated from her head, hands, legs, arms, and feet, by a line representing the boundaries drawn during partition. Mother on one side of the boarder and children on the other, the exhibit represents the generational trauma inherited

by the children of partition.³⁵ Displays, such as Chowdry's, are an important part of memorializing the stories of women who were not able to tell them themselves. Her art calls for the viewer to wrestle with the injustice of their experiences and preserves their stories for future generations.

When conducting research on partition history, it is important to consider the barriers which inhibit English language research on countries which speak a variety of languages. Before gaining independence from Britain, India's official language was English, as well as standard Urdu. Today, the Indian constitution recognizes twenty-two official languages. A remnant of British Colonial rule, English is still acknowledged as one of the two official languages of Pakistan but is not widely used by its population. Urdu, the second official language of Pakistan, is widely understood by the people but rarely used as a means for communication. Instead, daily speech is typically made up of four secondary languages, Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, and Balochi. With such a diverse group of languages, it is impossible to fully unearth the female experience in partition within the limitations of English research. Future researchers might expand upon the topic through the use of government documents, oral histories, and written accounts made in local languages during partition and in the years to follow.

In the chaos that sprung from partition, cultural and religious ideals of female honor caused women to become the embodiment of the division which took place between the countries of India and Pakistan. Women were not simply victims of violence; their bodies and lives became the battle

grounds on which it took place. It was their men who were killed, their homes that were destroyed, and their bodies that were ravaged, yet perhaps the greatest assault on their personal agency was the recovery efforts that took place post partition. The trauma of recovery extended from the women to their children and on to the generations that have followed. Ultimately, the same honor that caused them to be targets for violence bound them to silence on their experiences, causing the histories of recovered women to become widely absent from partition remembrance. This historic amnesia has been the final blow for the women who were violated and abducted, ripped from the homes they created, and finally denied the ability to articulate these experiences for those who have come after.

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35. Nina Potichman, "Revisiting Pritika Chowdhry's Feminist and Decolonial Installations Speaking to India's Partition for Women's History Month," (2022), https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html

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