



## **Female Sexuality as Carrier of Masculinity: A Feminist Critique of History of Sub Continent Partition (1947)**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper presents a feminist critique on gendered nature of portrayal of women after war and communal riots. Women are the potential victims of violence as a weapon against the enemy to serve various purposes. It has been argued that the negative effects of wartime violence, particularly rape, have not been well addressed, and that the discourse surrounding the raped and abducted women in post-independence Pakistani society, has actually disempowered these women. The national programs of rehabilitation forced these women to hide their personal identities. As contrary to their personal stigmatized status, they were described as a collective symbol of honor for the state.*

**Key words:** Female sexuality, communal riots, Masculinity, Discourse, feminist critique, Human agency

## Introduction

Gender relations have been widely discussed throughout the history of human society. Sometimes, it is found as an egalitarian relation and sometimes it is a repressive one. Despite the biological equity of men and women, debate of authority of a sex continues. Men claim to be granted authority as they are the bread winners and protectors for the family. The supremacy of a male is often considered functional for society as one of the both sexes has to assume the authoritarian role ultimately. Women's confinement to the private domain is attributed to her biological subtleness and reproductive obligations and. Women have been and still are considered an emblem of men's honor (Gherat) in Indo-Pak sub-continent from ages. The protection of female sexuality has been a prime responsibility of men folk. During peace, incidences of individual sexual crimes are not as propagated as in war times. During wars or communal riots, the discourse on female sexual violence has been used as a main agent of disgust against enemy. Discussing women sexuality as threatened by the enemy has been described to arouse the enthusiasm and animosity against enemy among the masses.

The social structure considers female sexuality as something not repairable if broken. Over-emphasis on chastity and tabooed relations make the abducted or raped women vulnerable particularly during wars or communal riots. Women's bodies are made the preferred sites throughout societal discourse as tabooed or as the symbol of respect. The first round feminist research on Partition describes the rejections of abducted and raped women to the social production of a discourse of honor and, especially, of women's sexual purity. Dating back to the nineteenth century, the discourse of women's purity was set up by elites to counter issues of foreign supremacy. At the interface with the colonizer, women's sexuality was made a critical site of symbolic political identity. And in her different roles like as Wife or Mother, it was a body

meant to function as the supreme emblem of a nation's selfhood.

This feminist discourse traces the historical outlines of the process through which the elites of sub-continent reconstituted the gendered private sphere as the only independent space. These feminists traced the symbolic purity associated with the "inner, or private, domain onto the actual bodies of women and the chaste woman's body as the owner of a crucial Indian/ Hindu identity, the period witnessed her transformation into an icon of the honor of the nation, the religious community, and the untainted household" (Daas 2009). They conclude that there was consciously designed process of myth-making whereby feminine sexual purity was considered as signifier of national virtue. The concept of an ideal femininity is not a product of some social pathology; instead, it was designed by combining macro sociological dynamics of colonialism and culture.

The term paper attempts to discuss the gendered impacts of communal riots during partition of Indo Pak subcontinent. It also aims at explaining recovery and rehabilitation programs as an attempt to restore nation's honor rather than women's personal honor, by applying Foucault's theory of Bio-power.

## **Background**

The end of colonial rule in subcontinent was marked by the anguish of partition which is simultaneously the most signifying and the most traumatic moment in South Asia's history. The departure of British brought about a bloody partition in which almost one million people were killed and over ten million were displaced. Above all, the women had to experience violence, dislocation and displacement. Oral histories documented by different NGOs working for the survivors of partition riots, reveal that women's accounts are filled with memories of loss and violence, the experience of

abduction and widowhood and sometimes even of rehabilitation. Rehabilitation projects are considered to be the most controversial in the aftermaths of partition. It points to the triangular relationship of women, communities and the state. (Butalia 1998).

Women, especially those who belonged to Punjab, were possibly the worst victims of the communal violence that accompanied the division of British India. Thousands of women on both sides of the newly formed border (estimates range from 25,000 to 29,000 Hindu and Sikh women and 12,000 to 15,000 Muslim women) were abducted, raped, forced to convert or forced into marriage. Women often internalized the patriarchal notion of their role in the society, and committed suicide in order to preserve the 'sanctity' and 'purity' of their religion.

Adding up to widespread killing, the Partition riots are marked by sexual violence, abduction and widowhood of thousands of women in both newly formed states. Indian and Pakistani authorities used the term 'recovery operation' to describe the carrying out of plans to return abducted women to their own states, communities and families. The term 'recovery' appears to have negative connotations today yet at that time, this was the most appropriate phrase for an 'operation' where women were not given any rights or choices to decide about their own future.

Pakistani official and historical accounts of Partition see the event as an upshot of high politics, and as a distressing cost of freedom. Pakistani academia also pointed to the inevitability of Partition, with little or no regret about the divide with 'Hindu' India. Nevertheless, the micro-narratives on the margins of the nation and cracked realities indicate that Partition is also a gendered narrative of nation building.

## **Gendered Experience of Partition: A Feminist Stance**

In patriarchal societies, women are often represented as the embodiment of honor for a nation. Paradoxically, this

respect for woman within the community leads to violence against the women of the 'other' community.

There have been fragmentary references to women being treated like criminals or polluted in the transit camps set up as transitory refuges for them before they were sent home to their respective countries. The feminist historiography on gendered experiences of Partition offers two important insights.

Firstly, the ritualized violence inscribed on bodies by members of the 'enemy' community as a sign of conquest and humiliation of the Other.

Secondly, how both men and women from one's own community committed sacrificial violence in the name of honor.

In the years immediately following partition, the sexuality of women became a subject of concern for both the Pakistani and Indian state. Women, regarded as carriers of culture whose bodies are symbols of the nation to be protected by men, are especially vulnerable in wars, where their identities as women come under risk. Thus the common tactic of rape as a means of degrading the enemy and breaking their spirit makes women into weapons of war. Rape becomes a tool of genetic imperialism and ethnic cleansing when impregnated women bear the enemy's children.

Hitherto, the concern for the abducted and raped woman had little to do with a female own sense of violation of her body and spirit; rather, it was a concern for male honor as it works at different levels—in the family, the community and the nation. This was reflected in many different discourses: representatives of political parties in the Legislative Assembly had extended and detailed debate on the issue. Newspapers were full of the concerns of men on the question of the abduction of women. The fact of the mass rape and abduction of women was a challenge to masculinity.

The 'recovery' operation, framed by both India and Pakistan caused women suffer a second trauma imposed by their 'own' state, community and family. Abducted by members of the 'enemy' community, yet 'recovered' by the state of which

women were considered citizens, they were forced to leave behind the 'post-abduction' children with their fathers, mostly responsible for violence. Many women resigned to their fate when they were once again uprooted and asked to re-live the trauma of Partition. The other problem was whether their families back home would accept them now that they had lost their chastity. In spite of these issues, state forcibly brought back the women, who did not want to leave behind their children or who by the time of the 'recovery' had settled in their new lives.

The state was fervent to control women's sexuality by exercising its rights over the female body, motherhood and private sphere. The discussion of morality, the nation building process and the exhilaration over the success of the anti-colonial movement left limited space for common women to express their feelings. In addition, it was impossible to challenge the hegemony of political elite. Women had little control over their lives. In most instances, this compromised women's agency and right to make their own choices. The state devised policies based on the national idea of how women's interests should be perceived, and no departure from this was acceptable.

### **Respectable or disreputable dichotomy: Theoretical explanation**

Three broad factors emerge from the representation of the rape victims/survivors in nation/state's discourse in post partition Pakistan: the portrayal of the women as victims; the presentation of the victims in stereotyped images of "feminine"; and the return of raped and abducted women to reinstate nation's respect. How did the state and society managed to control women lives by not giving them choice to return or not to return?

This can be explained by Foucault's theory of Biopower. It relates to the practice of modern nation states and the

regulation of their subjects through "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations. Power is exercised by means of surveillance upon the individual actor through regulations. The risk of surveillance creates a propensity toward self-monitoring in the individual and ultimately leads to the creation of productive and docile bodies".

Foucault also believed that power functions through the creation and maintenance of norms, which "codify behavior, and they categorize individuals either as normal or pathological" (McLaren 2004, 224). Gender norms are imposed not only by law but also by social taboos, and feminists claim that even positive norms, such as the women being virtuous, careful, and nonviolent, can serve to bring about the status quo by limiting women (McLaren 2004, 224). Foucault's theories of the exercise of power through discourse can be applied to the Pakistani raped and abducted women "trapped in [her] own history" (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982, 210).

The recovery of women labeled as raped and abducted carried certain implications and expectations. First the state fabricated discourse around female sexuality to raise enthusiasm among masses, then these sexually violated females were taken aback to restore nation's dignity. Irrespective of the fact that the society was not ready to accept these women at community or individual level, the abducted women had again to face partition dilemma. The women's reality, as is apparent in the oral histories and to some extent in the media reports, was one of dishonor and disrespect. Yet the social discourse along with the social norms and values swayed the women to act in line with the expectations of them as passive bodies—to accept what had happened to them and suffer in silence. The image of raped and abducted women in the media was that of a victimized woman, who is bound to feminine values and work, invisible and docile.

According to Foucault, power evolves in two forms through disciplinary and regulatory power respectively. The

first is “a knowledge of and power over the individual body,” aiming to make the individual body more passive “by creating desires, attaching individuals to specific identities, and establishing norms against which individuals and their behaviors and bodies are judged” (Sawicki 1999, 190). The second, regulatory power is “extolled in policies and interventions leading the population” (Sawicki 1999, 191). These two forms of biopower are applicable to the raped and abducted women discourse as well; the first at the micro level of the individual women, and the second with regard to the overarching state policy, rehabilitation programs, etc.

## **Conclusion**

This paper attempts to give a feminist critique on gendered nature of war and communal riots. Women as the barriers of culture are the potential victims of rape as a weapon against the enemy to serve multiple purposes. It lasts effects long after the actual battle is over. It has been argued that the negative effects of wartime rape have not been well addressed, and that the discourse surrounding the raped and abducted women in post-independence Pakistani society has actually disempowered these women. They were described and identified as rehabilitated women, imposing certain restriction on them. Whether they were presented as victims or salvaged in the media, their representation was based on their identity as a "female". The national programs of recovery and rehabilitation were coercive of these women to hide their personal identities. As contrary to their personal stigmatized status, they were described as a collective symbol of honor for the state. It made them docile witness of partition and deprived them of their agency to decide about the issues of family, reproduction or production.

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