RECOVERED AND RESTORED?
ABDUCTED WOMEN IN 1947 PARTITION NARRATIVES

Saiyma Aslam
Department of English
International Islamic University Islamabad.

Abstract

During the Partition of India in 1947, communal riots triggered unspeakable acts of horror against women of rival communities. A large number of women were abducted; some were later recovered and returned to their families. The trauma suffered by these abducted women and survivors extends all proportions. This paper analyses the dislocation, pain and trauma of abducted women, as depicted in two short stories: The Lost Ribbon by Shobha Rao (2016) and Banished (1998) by Jamila Hashmi originally published in Urdu as Banbas (exile) in Aap-Beeti, Jag-Beeti (1969). I consider the abducted women’s plight in view of the distinction Giorgio Agamben made of zoè (bare life) and bios (political life as a citizen) in Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1998) and The Use of Bodies (2015). I analyse how Partition reduced women to bare life, despite offering them hopes of life as a citizen of their respective independent countries. In this regard, I discuss their sufferings and trauma due to double dislocation, first stemming from rape, abduction and captivity in the wake of communal violence, and second due to the nature of the

1 Saiyma Aslam is the corresponding author (saiyma.aslam@iiu.edu.pk)
states’ intervention in their recovery and rehabilitation. My analysis also shows that recovery of abducted women should not be taken as synonymous with restoration because restoration of a traumatised human being to her pre-abduction state of mind and life is not possible.

**Keywords**

1947 Partition, bare life, political life, trauma, abducted women, Recovery and Restoration Act

**Introduction**

Rehabilitation of women abducted during the 1947 Partition, and the process they underwent to be sent to their families across borders, is still underexplored despite a growing interest by oral historians in documenting stories told by female survivors and social workers who assisted in their rehabilitation. Kamla Patel’s *Torn from the Roots: A Partition Memoir* (2006) and Anis Kidwai’s *In Freedom’s Shade* (2011) superbly capture the first-hand experiences of recovery of abducted women. Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (2000) and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin’s *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* (1998) are the most prominent authors to penetrate the now-subdued pains and agonies of the surviving Indian women. While there is no such publication of repute covering the horrific experiences of Muslim women during their migration and/or restoration to Pakistan, we do have scattered accounts that valorise, for example, how the Women’s Relief Committee, founded by Fatima Jinnah, and the Pakistan Voluntary Service, formed under the guidance of Begum Liaqat Ali Khan, engaged women from different walks of life to administer social and medical aid. *The Pakistan Times* chronicled the day to day progress of the recovery programme in Pakistan, efforts of women in relief and rehabilitation of the refugees flooding in from India, as well as “names and locations of women who had been recovered, with appeals to their families to come forward” (Virdee 2009, 480). Nevertheless, what is missing in these empirical listings of facts, figures, and moral invocations are accounts of women’s own testimonies and experiences of their sufferings.

It would not be wrong to say that the post-Partition historical narratives of the time did not consider testimonial details of abducted women as worthy of remembrance. During the riots, women who chose to commit suicide by jumping into wells, setting themselves on fire or letting their male members kill them, were
remembered by their families as honourably dead or martyred. Those who were raped and abducted by rival communities, were viewed as symbols of dishonour, hence the impulse to start anew by putting away these memories in the cold storage of history. I link this phenomenon to Judith Butler’s idea where certain losses are “nationally recognised and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable” (Butler 2004: xiv). The “differential allocation of grievability” of raped, abducted and murdered women attests to theirs being not “a liveable life and a grievable death” (Butler 2004: xiv, xv). This point gains strength from the fact that sacrifices of citizens were generally highly lauded by statesmen and politicians, mostly men, on both sides, against any attempts at also keeping alive the memory of abducted and recovered women. Over the years this attitude set the pace for what Butler calls “the loss of loss itself” (2003, 467). However, for the victims the loss continues to have an animating presence and hence must not be overlooked.

Motivated by the realization that “loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained” (Eng and Kazanjian 2003, 2), I read the selected literary works as filling in gaps left by the national historical narratives. Literary works focussing on the trauma of abducted women not only bring the silenced or ignored past to active memory, but also the forces, patriarchal as well as national, responsible for this erasure. The confluence of patriarchal and national forces clouds equal access of women to the status of citizen: “a two-faced being, the bearer both of subjection to sovereign power and of individual liberties” (Agamben 1998, 125). Even before subjection to the sovereign power, like their male counterparts, the patriarchal order restricts the women’s individual liberties to ensure they fulfil their role as “symbols of their community/male honour and upholder’s of ‘cultural values’; and ... as biological reproducers of religious and ethnic groups” (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 251). This point brings me to my take on the biopolitics of bare life of these abducted women who were violently separated from symbolic and political forms of life and were exposed to violence that did not even count as crime. First, when the rival community targeted the ‘other’s’ women, they turned these women from symbols of their families’ honour to symbols “of violence as the shame and subjection of her [their] community is represented in her [them]” (Jayawardena and De Alwis 1996, xvii). Later, during their recovery and rehabilitation, these women were further denied their political rights: “Originally abducted as war booty, these women were once again reduced to the status of goods and chattel, their reclaimed bodies and their products providing a crucial statistic through which a nation’s masculinity could be gauged; their ‘recovery’ thus, was not a project of salvation but a battle for virility” (Jayawardena and De Alwis 1996, xviii).
Partition was enacted more on the bodies of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh women, and it was less a jubilant celebration of a new beginning for such women than a traumatic reliving of their abduction, rape and torture, and perplexities about whether or not they would be recovered and/or accepted by their families. For that reason, I read their situation in light of the distinction Giorgio Agamben made of zoè (bare life) and bios (political life as a citizen). Aristotle’s conception of zoè (bare life), which is the form or way of life common to all living beings and bios, a form of living proper to an individual or group (Agamben 1998, 1), is further problematised by Agamben in defining zoè in terms of both “simple natural life” and “life exposed to death (bare or sacred life)” (1998, 88). This double variant on zoè was needed as simple natural life cannot be compared to political life, whereas bare or sacred life is intimately bound with the political life. Agamben considers bare or sacred life is “neither political bios nor natural zoè” but rather “the zone of indistinction in which zoè and bios constitute each other in including and excluding each other” (1998, 90). It is in this zone of indistinction, zoè, that life of the abducted women was exploited first in their captors’ custody; later, during their recovery, their rights as individuals and as free citizens were again dispensed with through “an inclusive exclusion (which thus serves to include what is excluded)” (Agamben 1998, 21) in favour of the identity of their communities and the will of their states. To break silence on this, I have selected two short stories: Shobha Rao’s *The Lost Ribbon* (2016) and Jamila Hashmi’s *Banished* (1998), originally published in Urdu as *Banbas* (1969). In doing so, I have analysed pain and trauma during women’s captivity, when recovery teams approached them, and afterwards with a strong assertion that recovery by no means should be taken as synonymous with restoration because “while the recovery of a person is possible, the restoration of a human being to her original state is not” (Rao 2016, xii).

**The Underside of History**

During the Partition of India in 1947, riots between the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities involved unspeakable acts of horror against women of rival communities. They were subjected to gruesome torture that involved rape, stripping and parading naked, knife open the wombs, removal of genitalia and branding of the victims’ bodies with symbols like the trident or the crescent moon. The trauma of these women martyrs and survivors can well be gauged by the barbarity and inhumanity of violence they were subjected to. Of these, the abducted women survivors’ trauma extends all proportions because, as Urvashi Butalia so aptly phrases, they were “the only people who had suffered a double dislocation as a result of Partition” (2000, 129). They endured ceaseless trauma in being passed on multiple times to different buyers/rapists, fear and apprehensions that assailed them when
they were recovered, tough choices they were forced to make to win acceptance by their erstwhile families and enforced silence over their pre-restoration life. It would not be wrong to say that the real “reality of Partition” is such women; in fact, “they are the history of the event” and “illuminate what one might call the ‘underside’ of history” (Butalia 2000, 8).

Amid what was perceived to be a state of exception, Indian and Pakistani states called an Inter-Dominion Conference on December 6, 1947 where it was decided that the matter of abducted women and children must be dealt with on a priority basis. At this Conference, the two countries legislated the return of these women with the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act. An abducted person was defined 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, has become separated from his or her family and is found to be living with or under the control of a non-Muslim individual or family” (quoted in Virdee 2018, 173). Officially it is estimated that “50,000 Muslim women in India and 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan” were abducted (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 70). Of these “in all, approximately 30,000 Muslim, Hindu and Sikh women were recovered by both countries over an eight-year period. The total number of Muslim women recovered was significantly higher-20,728 as against 9,032 Hindu and Sikh” (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 99).

With the promulgation of the Rehabilitation and Recovery of Abducted Persons Ordinance, 1949, the two governments displaced abducted women to a state of exception by treating them as figures to be recovered rather than as individual cases to be decided in compliance with wishes of the victims. In this ordinance, the writ of habeas corpus was overruled, pending cases of abducted persons before a high court or a magistrate were terminated, and unlimited powers were vested in a tribunal constituted to decide the disputed cases. A member of Parliament in India, Jaspat Roy Kapoor, raised strong objection against the powers vested in the tribunal: “What do we find in this Bill? We find that after release [these women] will have absolutely no say in the matter of the place where they are to live, in the matter of the companions with whom they are to live, and in the matter of the custody of their children ... I ask, in such cases, shall we be conferring liberty and freedom on her if we deny her these rights?” (quoted in Menon and Bhasin 1998, 106). The poignancy of this remark comes to life when read in the perspective of the tough decisions protagonists of the two stories were forced to undergo.

Of specific relevance to the debate central to this essay is an appeal made through The Pakistan Times published on 23 December, 1947. Other than referring
to the Inter-Dominion Conference held in Lahore on 6 December, 1947 to accelerate the recovery of abducted women, this appeal lays bare important variables, personal as well as public, that obfuscated seamless restoration of these recovered women. It states:

No civilisation can ignore with impunity the sanctity attaching to a woman’s person. ... Above all, the doubts and suspicions haunting these persons regarding the nature of reception awaiting them in their homes must be categorically removed. The public leaders in both the dominions have declared that these unfortunate victims of communal frenzy must be received with open arms. Every effort should, therefore, be made to erase their unfortunate experience and give them happy homes. But more than that it will close a tragic chapter in the history of the recent disturbances (quoted in Virdee 2018, 174-75).

The appeal is couched in the rhetoric of moral imperative and reflects the power of the states to intervene and influence both how these women should respond to their recovery operations and how society should respond to their return. This statement hints at the power that the states were bent upon exercising in order to normalise the fiasco created due to patriarchal powers gone awry in the name of preserving or avenging their honour by spoiling the same in a rival community. Bhasin and Menon comment accordingly: ‘Thus, the individual and collective sins of men who behaved without restraint or responsibility in a surge of communal “madness” had to be redeemed by nations who understood their duty in, once again, bringing about sexual discipline and, through it, the desired reinforcement of community and national identities’ (1998, 108). I read this simultaneous centring and othering of females as “legal intimation of how women’s individual rights as citizens can be abrogated in the interests of national honour” (Bhasin and Menon 1998, 253). Hence my understanding of the plight of these women in view of Giorgio Agamben’s conception of ‘bare life’ in The Use of Bodies (2015).

**Bare Life: Two Lives, One Destiny**

Along with Agamben’s view of zoê and bios discussed in the beginning, my discussion in this section is also guided by Ewa Plonowska Ziarek’s conceptualization of how sovereign violence is substituted for “seemingly ‘privatized,’ but also absolute, power of the slave holder” and “the sovereign destruction of bare life [is] substituted by the ‘living’ death of slavery” (2012, 149). Ziarek drives this nexus by juxtaposing Agamben’s bare life and threat of death by the sovereign power with Orlando Patterson’s slavery as social death. This view bears close relation to how abducted
women experienced symbolic death after rape, forced marriages and conversion. No wonder that this experience also entailed the stigma of social death for them, along with the emotional death that became their lot forever.

In *The Lost Ribbon* by Shobha Rao, a Hindu girl is abducted and raped by a Pathan and kept locked in a hut for two years. She gives birth to a girl, Noora, and this offspring is her only connection to life; she herself becomes emotionally and spiritually dead since the day she was abducted and raped. She has to strangle the baby to death as the recovery team does not allow her the option of taking her along. In *Banished* by Jamila Hashmi, a Muslim girl, Bibi, is abducted and forcibly married to a Sikh, Gurpal. She keeps alive the hope that one day she will be recovered, but when the opportunity is close, she hides herself as she too is the mother of a girl child and she does not want to leave her daughter behind to an uncertain fate. It is then that her abductor and his Bari Ma finally accept her as part of the family; her life of misery, beating, insults and hunger give way to that of being the Lakshmi (giver of fortune) of the house. But on her part, trauma and melancholia continue to unsettle her present existence. Even the fate of the Hindu girl who won freedom and was recovered is no different.

Denied access to political life and reduced to a bare life, these female protagonists operate as slaves. As (sex/domestic) slaves, these women do not represent proper human life, but “render possible for others (their captors) the *bios politikos*, that is to say, the truly human life” (Agamben 2015, 20). Condemned to a bare life, yet essential to the political life of their masters, these abducted and enslaved women constitute an interstitial threshold zone: “[a]nd if the human being is defined for the Greeks through a dialectic between *physis* and *nomos*, *zoe* and *bios*, then the slave, like bare life, stands at the threshold that separates and joins them” (Agamben 2015, 20). For that matter threshold constitutes immense importance for the two characters.

Condemned to a hut which is always padlocked, the only access to the world outside for the unnamed narrator of *The Lost Ribbon* is the window. It is the window that she turns to the first time she is raped by her captor and that she continues to go to in order to lessen her grief and, ironically, also to confirm and reconfirm the loss that is permanent and has to be endured. She links her loss of virginity to all the losses that she has had so far, from the loss of the white ribbon that she “adored” as “height of loveliness” but was stolen by her classmate to the loss of parting forever from her parents. The schoolgirl had run away with her white ribbon, “She’d held it up the entire time, the white ribbon streaming and bobbing in the wind . . . like the long tail of a shining mystical bird”. She lost the girl in an alley, but the “quick,
steady beating” of her heart was like “a fluttering” and she felt compensated for her loss by feeling the bird had left her with its heart. She was happy. “And though I’ve lost its tail I haven’t, I have not, lost its heart. But on that night [when she was raped], at that window, looking at those horrible stars, I knew I’d lost both” (Rao 2016, 108-109).

The recovery team reaches her, and it is through the threshold of this window that she has a connection with the politicos that she hopes will save her and end that bare life of slavery and servitude. In her monologue with her daughter, she regrets “I should’ve never opened it because you see, Noora, he said I was safe. He never said a thing about you” (Rao 2016, 116). She is reluctant to accept the proposal that to leave she’ll have to part with her Noora—her light. The Indian military representatives, including a woman, who have come to rescue her, deny her the right to take her daughter along as she is a Pakistani citizen and a Muslim. The old soldier counsels her to return to India, “You must, beti [daughter]. Now that we have found you, you must return to India.”

The woman in the recovery team clarifies that they have no authority to allow her take her daughter along.

“You have no choice,” she said. “There are governmental treaties we must follow.”
“What treaties? What governments?”
“Between India and Pakistan.”
“But this is my child.”
“She’s a child of Pakistan,” the old soldier said solemnly. “And you, my dear, are not.” (Rao 2016, 118).

The Hindu girl in Shoba Rao’s story is unlucky as she is shown recovered at a time when the Indian government had not adopted a relaxed approach. While initially the Indian state was rigid in not accepting children born to such abducted women, later it relaxed its stance and the relevant authorities agreed to let these women take the children along to the Jullundur camp. There they were given some days to decide whether they would like to keep the children. Those who were in their thirties were not very keen to keep them as they had had children before, but first-time mothers, like the unnamed Hindu girl in The Lost Ribbon, did not want to part with their children. When the time came to see their families, even they realised that their families would never accept their babies. Hence faced with the predicament of either staying at the camp forever, which was not possible, or going with their families, these women had to sever their links with their children (if not literally kill them) who were later sent to orphanages. Kamla Patel shares the following with
Menon and Bhasin (1998): “If we had left them behind in Pakistan then it would have been like snatching, but now these women left them behind of their own accord. That makes a difference in a woman’s life. The difference between doing something by force and doing it of your own choice. This can be compared to a two-edged sword where we don’t know which edge will be sharper. I certainly wasn’t able to tell” (85).

The Muslim girl Bibi in Jamila Hashmi’s Banished is abducted by a Sikh, Gurpal. He brings home the prized possession and dumps her at his Bari Ma’s feet saying “Here I’ve brought you a bahu (a daughter-in-law) She is your maid. She will do whatever you tell her to do—grind grain, fetch water, anything you want. I won’t meddle” (Hashmi 1998, 87). Banished brings much closer the above take on bare bodies and the state of exception they are in:

the relation of exception is a relation of ban. He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it, but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. It is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside (Agamben 1998, 28-29).

She is perpetually caught in a threshold of happy memories of her family that are all dislocated by Partition and the bleak and painful present, with no hope of redemption in her future. She finds traces of her banishment in nature: “Evenings make me sad; I wonder why. A solitary star throbs forlornly in the sky, like the flickering flame of an earthen lamp. In the blue, empty space its loneliness reminds me of my banishment. In this human wilderness I am like a lonely tree which neither blossoms nor bears fruit” (Hashmi 1998, 89). She too stands waiting in the doorway, staring into “serpentine village pathways” hoping for her release. When prospects of release are at her doorstep, she evades them as the army was not accompanied by her brothers and she fears a second exile: “Rather than embrace a second exile, Sitaji has accepted a life with Ravan. Where would I find the strength to step out of the darkness with nothing but uncertainty for support?” (Hashmi1998, 102). Here her feelings are reflective of countless women who refused and resisted recovery. Of the many reasons for refusal that Anis Kidwai discusses in her memoir In Freedom’s Shade, one relevant in this context is that an abducted woman “loathed herself as a wanton who had expended her dignity by being with strange men for months” and was apprehensive if “her parents, husband, society, would own her again. A deep sense of misgiving and a fear of rejection would drive her to refuse the offer” (Kidwai 2011, 149).
Bibi is a Muslim girl and is not the only abducted girl brought to this village. Her monologue brings out the poignancy of the situation, saying that “many such ‘brides’ were brought to the village of Sangraon, but without the customary fanfare” (Hashmi 1998, 87) that accompanies marriage ceremonies. So this girl and many other abducted girls become brides without any actual ceremony. “Oh. What a welcome this new bride was offered!” bemoans the abducted girl (Hashmi 1998, 87). The internal monologue of this abducted girl intensifies the nature of tragic celebrations that accompanied the move of such girls from their paternal houses to the abductor cum in-law’s houses during the Partition riots. The description is heart-rending and exemplifies the “decimation, withering, and ruination” visited upon such hapless victims. “Well, may be Bhai and Bhaiyya weren’t present at my wedding so what? Hadn’t Gurpal rolled out a carpet of corpses for me? Painted the roads red with blood? Provided an illumination by burning down city after city? Didn’t people celebrate my wedding as they stampeded, screaming and crying? It was a wedding, all right. Only the customs were new: celebration by fire, smoke, and blood” (Hashmi 1998, 100). From the day she was brought to his house, she “felt like Sita, enduring her exile, incarcerated in Sangaron” (Hashmi 1998, 87) and considered Gurpal Ravan.

In fact, Partition’s violence on women becomes far more tragic in this invocation of Indian mythology in her monologue. She moans: “Who has the time or inclination to listen to Sitaji’s lament in this country?” (Hashmi 1998, 92-93). Recourse to Indian mythology has tragic implications during the post-Partition period. In the Ramayana, Sita lived a life of banishment but was treated with respect and reverence. Ravan never defiled her. The Sita in this story is slave to Ravan, was raped and is forced to live a life of insults, beatings, and hunger and has born him three children. This story symbolises the tragic loss chaste women of the subcontinent, irrespective of their religious backgrounds, had undergone in the wake of the Partition. A Muslim girl comparing her life in exile to that of Sita in the Ramayana has tragic undertones. Gone is the banishment where Sita could stay pure and respected all the same. The modern day post-partition Sita(s) were raped, and both their physical and emotional banishments were prolonged, owing to being forced to stay with their abductors through physical force or inhibitions: the door of the hut remains padlocked in The Lost Ribbon, and in Banished the bahu (daughter-in-law) never sets foot outside the village in so many years.

Emotional entrapments too circumscribe the limits of these Sitas. The Hindu girl is in a fix: should she stay with her abductor just to be with her daughter or should she strangle her daughter and leave for India? She strangles her daughter and
finds a release from Ravan, but her exile and banishment continue in the form of emotional trauma. Bibi, the Muslim Sita, too, develops roots only after she has given birth to a daughter. Before this, the birth of two sons had not made her feel constrained. She thought she would end her exile the moment she got a chance of recovery, but now regrets that hope: “Where can I go – with my wounded heart, my darkened fate? Munni stands in my way. She is the great distance that separates me from my own family. How can I dare look beyond her, beyond that distance?” (Hashmi 1998, 93). Her internal monologue further reveals the tension she experiences when soldiers come to Sangaron to recover her: “I wondered: who were these soldiers? And what would that country be like? For the first time I felt unsure of myself. My dreamland turned into dust and vanished. I realised my roots had sunk deep in Sangaron” (Hashmi 1998, 100). The roots that this woman develops are not of belonging to this place and life, but that of staying put. With a daughter’s fate in perspective, she is bound hand and foot to not even think for herself. She cannot leave her behind and does not even have the reassuring presence of her brothers to know if they will also welcome Munni in their life.

Interestingly, Bari Ma allows her bahu to step outside the village only when her fears are quenched after seeing her bahu hide at the arrival of the recovery team to avoid being recovered. It was after this incident that the young woman’s physical captivity within the four walls of the house ends and she is allowed to set foot outside. The occasion when she goes outside is the Dussehra fair, which symbolizes the triumph of good over evil and the rescue and recovery of princess Sita by God Rama. In the case of this Muslim woman, no Rama comes to end her exile. “When the army did come to secure my release, I hid myself, just like the princess in the fairy tale. I wasn’t about to leave with strangers. Why didn’t Bhaiyya and Bhai come to take me away? I felt hurt by both of them. And I’ve remained angry with them ever since” (Hashmi 1998, 101). This statement attests to the innumerable apprehensions that cloud an abducted woman’s perception, alleviated only when she has assurance that her family is there to accept her and take her along.

Bibi too wishes for a similar rescue with sure signs that she has been searched for and that her brothers care for her. She is also unsure about the government’s initiative for repatriation of abducted women, “Repatriate them to what country? Where? To Whom?” (Hashmi 1998, 100). Her apprehensions bring to mind what Mridula Sarabhai noted about the state of mind of any forcibly recovered woman:

I am a Sikh. I am happy. Pray do not send me to Pakistan. I will do just as you want me to do. Please have mercy on me”—such would be the plea of a stunned young Muslim newcomer [to the camp]. There was no meaning with
arguing with her at that stage. She had to be made to feel at home and given time to gather herself. ... Then the second stage – she would want to know why she was recovered. The third would be a query about conditions in Pakistan. What are they like? Were her relatives alive? Would they take her back? Had anyone made enquiries about her? And finally, by the evening, she would be so eager to go back that her impatience would not brook even a few minutes’ delay (quoted in Kidwai 2018, 169).

Recovery and Restoration?

My discussion in this section centres around the impact on women’s psychology of the trauma of abduction, forced captivity and tough choices they had to make. For the recovery to happen, both the female characters had to part with their children. The Hindu girl kills her infant in the hope of also saving her from future sexual exploitation. Bibi decides against rescue and recovery as she does not want to part with her daughter and knows Gurpal is not an abusive father to his children. Comparing their lives, I argue that recovery is not synonymous with restoration to a pre-abduction state of mind and life. If the two were synonymous, the Hindu girl would not have been equally disturbed, like her Muslim counterpart, by “haunting presences” of “ghosts of the past” (LaCapra 2014, 215). Invoking Dominick LaCapra’s rereading of Sigmund Freud’s distinction of mourning and melancholia, I do not see the Hindu girl as simply “working through”, that is, mourning her, what Freud called, ‘object loss’. In fact, like Bibi in “Banished,” she clings to her past in the sense of ‘acting out’ her ‘object loss’ in a state of melancholia (LaCapra 2014, 65). In his essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud distinguishes between the two terms, mourning and melancholia. Mourning is described as a normal and healthy process in which a person reacts to “the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (1917, 242). Freud considers it a healthy process and when it is complete or over “the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (1917, 244). On the other hand, in melancholia the ‘object-loss’ has become part of the unconscious, and the ego has become poor and empty (1917, 244, 245).

The Hindu girl and Bibi both suffer from melancholia, “a continuous engagement with loss and its remains” – “bringing its ghosts and specters, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present” (Eng and Kazanjian 2003, 4). It is here that my stance on bare life finds strength from feminist interpretations of melancholia that centre-stage “the erasure of women’s suffering in politics” and “invisible death of the feminine in the middle of historical catastrophes and political renaissance” (Ziarek 2012, 84). Their traumatic experiences haunt their present lives in the form of
flashbacks, hallucinations, or dreams. The Hindu girl of *The Lost Ribbon* lives in an ashram, which is for single women and women who were not claimed by their families and hence belongs nowhere. She has been living at the ashram for the last forty years and to this day she is not really attentive to anything in her surroundings. In her monologue, she asks, “What am I looking for?” and replies to this as “Noora: I am looking for you” (Rao 2016, 110), that is, still living in her traumatic past. In order to ‘distract’ herself from the grief that is ‘relentless’ and ‘unerring’, she has taken to counting piles of lentils. It takes her half an hour to “count out nine hundred and eighty-six lentils. That is what I give myself every day: thirty minutes” (Rao 2016, 121-122). She can distract her attention only for thirty minutes each day, such is the extent of her loss and trauma.

On the other hand, even though the Muslim girl in *Banished* stays with her abductor, she remains haunted by the fact that “[i]n the long wintry nights, suffering starts up a bonfire, summons old dreams, and listens to stories.... But the heart is very stubborn. It keeps remembering the past. Why?” (Hashmi 1998, 103). She hears her Aapa’s screams in “the howling gusts of wind” (Hashmi 1998, 98). When Gurpal brings a book to teach Munni alphabets, she recalls how her brothers used to encourage her to read books. She tries to keep herself busy with domestic chores to avoid “assault of all these thoughts” but confesses that “That time lives on in my memory, just as it was.” She comments that she is as helpless now as she was that day (Hashmi 1998, 94, 97, 98). She was never recovered and never restored despite being accepted in her abductor cum husband’s house. One woman is recovered, the other is not, but both remain equally traumatised. This proves recovery does not by any means guarantee restoration to pre-abduction state of mind. For the state rhetoric, recoveries may “close a tragic chapter in the history of the recent disturbances” (quoted in Virdee 2018, 175), but for the women it remains like a ‘throbbing’ cigarette burn (the captor of the Hindu girl did this to her forty years ago so that she doesn’t forget to lie to the recovery teams) that “wouldn’t hush. Not for a minute” (Rao 2016, 121). This best answers Jacques Derrida’s question “Does language bear within itself the remains of burning?” Indeed “the figurative fire [of her loss and trauma] can be felt in the cinders of [her] language” (Lukacher 1991, 2). For the survivors, this loss continues to have an animating presence. For them, “past is not actually past in the sense of ‘over’. As the discussion shows, their past “makes itself known precisely in and through the survival of anachronism itself” (Butler 2003, 468).

*Recovered and Restored? Abducted Women in 1947 Partition Narratives* is an effort towards breaking silence on the fears and trauma of abducted women and the fact that recovery does not mean restoration to a pre-abduction status and state of mind.
It also lays bare how women remain vulnerable, both during peaks of communal unrest and national identity formations. A forced amnesia that surrounds the lives of these victims at communal and national levels, attested to also by a few book-length studies on the issue, surely needs to be shattered to probe how women undergo different states of exception in the name of patriarchal and national honour.

Endnotes

1 Nighat Said Khan conducted over 100 interviews in rural and urban Sind and Punjab with women migrants from India. It is not easily accessible despite its immense significance. Initially, her work was part of a greater project that aimed to study women’s experiences of migration in North-West India and Pakistan. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin were to study Indian women’s experiences and as their counterparts Nighat Said Khan and Anis Haroon were to interview the Muslim migrants from India. Khan mentions that “Given our different interests, biases, and our subjectivities, the study has been separated and is being pursued in India and in Pakistan as two separate studies” (1994, 170). While Menon and Bhasin’s work Borders and Boundaries has influenced countless initiatives, Khan’s is a lesser known resource. Zareena Qasim’s PhD dissertation on “A Literary-Critical Discourse Approach to Female Narratives of 1947 Migration” is another important work available from International Islamic University, Islamabad’s library only.

2 In Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary, Veena Das talks about how there has been no attempt to memorialize the Partition in the form of national monuments or museums. She also points out that “no attempt was made, for that matter, to use the legal instruments of trials or public hearings to allow stories of mass rape and murder to be made public or to offer a promise of justice to the violated persons” (2007, 19).

3 During the rehabilitation and recovery of the abducted persons, both countries decided to offer clemency to all those who would present abducted women within the stipulated time of announcements to encourage more recoveries. In this regard Malik Feroz Khan Noon’s comment in his visit to Bihar is cited in different texts. See for example, Jayawardena and De Alwis 1996, 6.

4 The definition remains the same in the Pakistani documents except that the focus was on Hindu women abducted and held by Muslims in Pakistan.

5 “If any question arises whether a person detained in a camp is or is not an abducted person or whether such person should be restored to his or her relatives or handed over to any other person or conveyed out of India or allowed to leave the camp, it shall be referred to, and decided by, a tribunal
constituted for the purpose by the Central Government” (Menon and Bhasin 1998,262). For further details on the constitution of the tribunal and different clauses of the Ordinance, read Borders and Boundaries (1998) and Pipa Virdee’s From the Ashes of 1947: Reimagining Punjab (2018).

6 When children born at ashrams for the abducted women were offered to an orphanage, they had only the names of their mothers and their religion. There were cases when nothing was known about a child, neither his or her mother’s name or religion. In The Other Side of Silence, Urvashi Butalia calls such children “child[ren] of history, without a history” (p. 129).

Bibliography


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