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A Study of "Womanhood" as Symbols to Further Colonial, Nationalist, and Religious Communal Agendas in the Indian Subcontinent

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Abstract

This study delves into the historical exploitation of women as symbols to advance colonial, nationalist, and religious communal agendas, particularly focusing on the Indian subcontinent. Through an analysis of various events, including the British response to widow immolation, the Bengal Renaissance, and the aftermath of the Partition of India, the study highlights how women's plight was manipulated to serve broader political goals. Drawing from sources such as Tanika Sarkar's *Rebels, Wives, Saints* and Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, the study underscores the dual nature of women's victimization: first by patriarchal structures and then by the instrumentalization of their suffering to bolster ideological narratives. It argues that despite purported humanitarian concerns, women's agency and well-being were often overlooked, with their experiences reduced to mere symbols in the pursuit of power and national identity. This study aims to shed light on the complex intersections of gender, politics, and power dynamics in historical contexts. Examining the instrumentalization of women's suffering for political ends prompts reflection on the ethical implications of using marginalized groups as symbols to promote ostensibly progressive agendas.

Keywords: colonialism, gender identity, nationalism, religion, patriarchy, partition of India, regulative ideology, silenced voices, symbolic exploitation, transnational feminism, women's agency

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Introduction

"...rulers change, those who are ruled remain the same"[1]- Ritu Menon.

It is with no surprise, yet with immense regret and shame, a fact can be claimed regarding how the nation states treated women. Nation states treated, and still use the symbol of women, according to their agendas and purposes. The whole social system, which is the basis upon which nation-states all over the world operate, is fundamentally to acquire a power position and become commercially successful. Furthermore, as these bureaucratic and commercial institutions are, and always were, by nature patriarchal, it is evident that for many women the experience of belonging to a society or a culture or a nation where they were born remains incomplete as they are assigned, at the moment of their birth, a fixed role and a definition with which they have to live all their lives. Suppose one analyzes the human history of the past one hundred years to ensure the well-being of women. In that case, it can be said that human civilization indeed has only lived from "hand to mouth", in the words of John Wolfgang Von Goethe.

This study assumes, with a considerable degree of clarity and certainty, that the reason for the inability to ensure the well-being of women in general, and the fact that women have always belonged, depending upon their class, race and religion, at different positions of power structures of different societies and the different agendas of nation states, is primarily because women, historically, as Simon de Beauvoir has shown in her seminal work *The Second Sex*, woman have been defined as a myth, a symbol bearing a significant image which upholds the ideals of the nation or culture. In addition to that, if women are then not able to carry the symbol with which they are being burdened, the society in which they belong, and the nation as a whole, condemns them. As a result either they live in a hegemonic structure where they have to maintain a symbol enforced upon them by the nation states, or they have to live being addressed with derogatory terms such as prostitutes etc. As Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*, "Thus what man cherishes and detests first of all in a woman- loved one or mother- is the fixed image of his animal destiny; it is the life that is necessary to his existence but that condemns him to the finite and death" (Beauvoir, 1997, pp. 197-198).

Through these lines a rationale can be traced as to why nation-states, being fundamentally patriarchal in nature, force women to carry a symbol either resulting from nationalism and communalism or, to simply state, bear the symbol of the culture of the society where she has been born. This fact can be seen in various epochs of history. This study will aim to focus on the era of Britain's colonialism of India, India's nationalist attempt to culturally free itself from the then-British ideas of liberalism, and the Partition of India resulting in the birth of two nation states, India and Pakistan, as some of the many contexts available in history, to illustrate the fact that women have been used as a symbol, or means, to promote the agendas of colonialism, nationalism, religious communalism depending upon the various formation of power structures in the Indian Subcontinent.

[1] This quote has been taken from the article entitled "Do Women have a Country" published in the Daily Star Weekend Magazine in the date August 25 2017, reflecting the completion of 70 years of the Partition of India.

Literature Review

British explorers and administrators in colonial India were struck by the practice of widow immolation, viewing it as a barbaric and inhuman tradition that symbolized India's need for civilizing influences. Tanika Sarkar's work highlights how colonial authorities used sati as a justification for perpetuating British dominance in India, framing it as a humanitarian concern while expanding colonial governmentality. The passage underscores the role of social reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Bhudev Mukhopadhaya in abolishing sati during the Bengal Renaissance. These reformers, driven by nationalist agendas, sought to address women's issues within a framework of national identity and cultural revivalism. However, their efforts were often limited by their focus on middle-class Hindu women, neglecting the experiences of women from other religious and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The literature discusses how nationalist movements in 19th-century India promoted women's education as a means of advancing nationalist agendas and challenging British colonialism. Partha Chatterjee's analysis, as referenced in the passage, highlights the nationalist resolution of the women's question, which prioritized the education of Hindu middle-class women while marginalizing women from other communities and social classes. Despite the abolition of sati and efforts towards women's education, the emergence of new forms of patriarchy during the Bengal Renaissance happened. Middle-class Hindu women were expected to uphold nationalist values and reject British liberalism, leading to the imposition of rigid gender roles and cultural expectations. This resulted in the creation of a "new patriarchy" that enforced traditional gender norms while masquerading as a symbol of cultural revivalism. Fanon's seminal work delves into the psychological effects of colonialism and racism on individuals, particularly focusing on the colonized subject's internalization of the colonizer's values and beliefs.

The forward to the 1986 edition, written by Homi Bhabha, provides additional insights into the ongoing impact of colonial power dynamics. Bhabha's commentary on the impossibility of reconciliation between colonizers and colonized challenges the notion of a harmonious synthesis and emphasizes the enduring nature of colonial legacies. This source enriches the passage by introducing critical perspectives on colonial power structures and their lasting repercussions on marginalized communities. Bhabha's analysis adds depth to the discussion on the complexities of decolonization and the challenges of forging post-colonial identities. "Lajwanti" is a short story that explores the experiences of women affected by the Partition of India in 1947. Through the character of Lajwanti, the narrative portrays the emotional and psychological trauma endured by abducted and displaced women. The story sheds light on the complexities of gender dynamics, religious identity, and societal expectations in the aftermath of partition. This literary work serves as a poignant illustration of the lived experiences of women during a tumultuous period in South Asian history.

By analyzing Lajwanti's story, it offers insights into the intersectionality of gender, nationalism, and religious identity. The narrative humanizes the broader historical context, allowing readers to empathize with the struggles and resilience of individual women. Butalia's book *The Other Side of Silence* examines the experiences of women affected by the Partition of India in 1947, shedding light on how the governments of Pakistan and India utilized the circumstances and status of women to uphold their national identities and impose state

ideology. The author analyzes how women were instrumentalized and given different identities based on religious nationalism, shaping narratives of national honor and masculinity. This source provides valuable insights into the gendered dimensions of nation-building processes in post-colonial South Asia. Butalia's exploration of how women were portrayed as symbols of national honor highlights the complex intersections of gender, nationalism, and religious identity. By examining the narratives constructed around abducted women and their repatriation, the passage offers critical perspectives on the instrumentalization of women in nationalist agendas.

Badiou's work *The Communist Hypothesis* explores the concept of truth as an elusive and fragile event, discernible only through ambiguous traces. Slavoj Zizek's analysis of Badiou's ideas emphasizes the role of imaginary ideological illusions in inscribing fragile realities into symbolic fiction, thereby constituting positive social realities. This theoretical framework helps contextualize the gendered dynamics of nationalist and religious ideologies discussed in the passage. By conceptualizing gender as a regulative idea within majoritarian values, the literature review illuminates how social realities are shaped by collective orthodox religious and nationalist narratives. Badiou's notion of truth as a regulative idea provides a theoretical lens for understanding the construction of gendered identities within ideological frameworks.

Fanon's seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth* examines the dynamics of decolonization and the perpetuation of colonial power structures during periods of nationalist struggle. The passage quotes Fanon's observation that the primary Manichaeism governing colonial society persists during decolonization, with the colonizer remaining the enemy to be overthrown. Fanon's insights into the persistence of colonial power dynamics offer a framework for understanding the contemporary manifestations of colonial legacies in post-colonial societies. By highlighting the continuities between colonial and post-colonial power relations, the literature review underscores the enduring impact of colonialism on nationalist ideologies and gendered identities in South Asia.

By invoking legal and constitutional frameworks, the literature review underscores the tensions between nationalist agendas and constitutional principles of equality and non-discrimination. The inclusion of these legal provisions highlights the contradiction between the BJP's Citizenship Amendment Acts (CAA) and the constitutional guarantees of equal protection and non-discrimination, offering a critical perspective on the exclusionary practices targeting Muslim women in India. The reference to the report by the International Secretariat of OMCT provides a specific instance of gang rape targeting minority Hindu women, namely Ms. Nilu Rani Das and Ms. Popy Rani Das, in Bangladesh. The report underscores the vulnerability of minority women to sexual violence and the broader context of discrimination and marginalization faced by their communities.

By citing this report, the passage grounds its discussion in documented cases of violence against minority women, emphasizing the urgent need for attention and action to address such atrocities. The report serves as a testament to the systemic nature of gender-based violence and the intersectional dynamics of religious and gender oppression. The mention of a recent incident reported by The Indian Express highlights ongoing instances of abduction, forced

conversion, and rape targeting Hindu women in Pakistan's Sindh region. The article details the abduction of a married Hindu girl who was subjected to rape and coercion to convert to Islam. This source provides a contemporary example of the perpetuation of violence against minority women, illustrating the persistence of systemic issues and the failure of authorities to address the root causes of religious intolerance and gender-based violence. The article reinforces the argument that women from minority communities continue to face egregious violations of their rights and dignity.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, relying on the analysis of secondary sources, historical events, and narrations to investigate the exploitation of women as symbols in colonial, nationalist, and religious communal agendas within the Indian subcontinent. The methodology encompasses a systematic process: Firstly, an extensive literature review is conducted to establish a foundational understanding of the topic, encompassing scholarly works, historical texts, and theoretical frameworks. The selection of secondary sources is based on their relevance to the study's focus, emphasizing materials that offer insights into the historical exploitation of women and the interplay between gender, politics, and nationalism.
Subsequently, data collection involves sourcing information from chosen secondary materials, historical documents, and accounts of significant events such as the Partition of India. This process employs various resources, including digitized archives, library collections, and online repositories, to capture diverse perspectives and historical narratives.

The collected data undergoes rigorous textual analysis, aiming to identify recurring themes, patterns, and narratives about the exploitation of women for colonial, nationalist, and religious communal agendas. This analysis draws from primary source documents, secondary literature, and historical narrations to extract pertinent information. The interpretation and synthesis phase contextualizes the findings within the theoretical framework of the study, incorporating insights from scholars such as Urvashi Butalia, Frantz Fanon, and Homi Bhabha. This process involves synthesizing diverse perspectives to construct a holistic understanding of the role of women as symbols within colonial and nationalist discourses.

Throughout the research process, critical reflection is employed to evaluate the limitations, biases, and ethical considerations inherent in studying sensitive historical topics. Alternative interpretations are considered, and gaps in the literature are acknowledged, ensuring a comprehensive analysis. Finally, the findings are synthesized into a coherent narrative, supported by evidence drawn from secondary sources and historical events. The research is presented in a clear and accessible manner, adhering to academic conventions. Overall, this methodology facilitates a rigorous examination of the exploitation of women as symbols in colonial, nationalist, and religious communal agendas, leveraging secondary sources and historical narratives to offer insights into this phenomenon.

Analysis

When India was under the colonial dominance of Britain, the British explorers and those who lived in India for administrative purposes were struck by the norm of widow immolation which was practised in then India. Immediately the British took this as an excuse, under the guise of genuine humanitarian concern, to promulgate and perpetuate the need for India to

remain under British rule and become civilised. In the book *Rebels, Wives, Saints* Tanika Sarkar writes,

> The conditions that were laid upon the ritual [of Widow Immolation] were culled from various scriptural sources by accredited pundits and were not new. What was new, however, was the act of pulling them together to form a code of conduct that would be used by agents of the government for each performance of sati...Very lately, then, the ritual of sati had entered the bureaucratic domain, enlarging the scope of colonial governmentality and influence over the practice. (Sarkar, 2010, p. 10)

What is important to notice in the aforementioned passage is the fact that widow immolation became the scope for enlarging the colonial governmentality and influence of Britain over India; the gestalt was not on the fact that inhuman practices were undertaken in the name of religion, it was on the British agenda to perpetuate their dominance in India by labelling them as a place where barbaric and inhuman practices are undertaken such as the ritual of Sati. Indeed there is no question about the extent of barbarity Hindu women had to face in the then India if they became widows, and also to the fact that British interventions did halt many such individual rituals of sati and many individual women's lives were saved. Some women, however, wanted deliberately to burn themselves after their husband's demise, and it can be deduced that not all women wanted to embrace such a tragic phase only due to their religious sensibilities. Some women perhaps wanted to die since as they have become widows, the society or state will not accept them anymore the way they have accepted them, they will be individuals who are banned from the scriptural teachings and would have to live a life of condemnation.

Whatever the case may be, the very fact that women were used, both from the side of India as well as from the side of Britain, as symbols to uphold their agendas, not as beings whose social and existential conditions needed humanitarian contemplation. As India shifted from the 18th to the 19th century, during the era of the Bengal Renaissance activists and social reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Bhudev Mukhopadhaya abolished widow immolation as the normative practice of India which needed to be changed. They were successful in doing that; however, these reformers had a particular nationalist agenda in accordance with which they addressed the problems of women's questions and provided a solution for them. As stated before the British used the issue of widow immolation as an issue to propagate how India needed to learn civilisation from Britain, however during the time of the Bengal Renaissance, the educated middle class of 19th century India felt a need for a national assertion of identity which would help them to be free from the dominance of British colonialism.

The reason why rationale which people like Ram Mohan Roy and his contemporaries had to provide for Britain's claim of the need for their presence in a place where uncivilised practices such as Widow Immolation are being practised is to make sure that Indian women must not embrace the liberal values of Britain and condemn the traditions of India. Although women who had a conscience to perceive the differences between the liberal values of Britain and in contrast to the crippling traditions of India were a few educated middle-class women,

however, there was a possibility that then Britain could have used them to promote and strengthen further justification of colonial intervention. As a result during the era of the Bengal Renaissance, a new class of women was created for the new patriarchy which was formed by the reformation activities of Bharma Shamaj and other writers and activists. These new women were those who belonged to the Hindu Middle Class, who would be provided education by the Indian way of education, one of the many movements towards modernisation in India undertaken stalled by "nationalist politics", as Partha Chatterjee has mentioned in his essay "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question", and then would take care of the household. The very reason for these women to avail themselves of the facility of education was not to enhance their perception of life and undertake intellectual pursuits, but to promote a nationalist agenda that India could educate her women and save them from the old inhuman practices and that British colonial intervention is not inevitable.

Such a step was taken by the activists of Bengal Renaissance to free Bengal, and India, from the cultural hegemony of then Britain and its colonial agenda of creating value judgements. Women of other classes, such as poor Hindu women or Muslim women, were left out by 19th-century Indian nationalists and only Hindu Middle-class women were given a chance at education because through them the nationalist agendas of Ram Mohan Roy and other patriarchal nationalists of then India would be fulfilled. It did as Partha Chatterjee states in his aforementioned article the issue of the women's question in India during the 19th century was forgotten by the people as there appeared a nationalist resolution of the women's question which, as will be illustrated now, did not at all solve the women's question.

Firstly, the 19th-century Indian nationalist agenda did not solve the women's question because, as stated before, it provided a solution for women who belonged to a particular class and religion, and therefore remained very exclusive in nature as women who were Muslims and women who belonged to lower middle class were left out. Secondly, the particular class of women who were given education was almost forced to abandon reading British novels and live a life like the British heroines, or those middle-class Hindu women who wanted to embrace the British liberal values were categorised as imitators of British "memsahibs", were condemned upon the ground that "women no longer cook, sweep or make bed...and only read books, sew carpets and play cards" (Chatterjee, 1987, p. 63). These are the words of Bhudev Mukhopadhyay who perceived this to be a matter of "injudicious imitation" as if women do not take care of households, men, who earn money and hence need a wife, and children who need a mother to take care of them would die of malnutrition. Writers like Iswarchandra Gupta, Michael Madhusudan, Dinabandhu Mitra etc all ridiculed women who advocated for British liberalism and "imitated the memsahibs". As a result the Bengali Hindu Middle-class women, who, it needs to be mentioned, as Partha Chatterjee writes, were the wives of a wealthy "social elite class emerging around the institutions of colonial administration and trade" (Henceforth *Woman's Question,* p. 241), were culturally forced to embrace the way of education. Forcing women to undertake anything, be it education or values, cannot be said to be emancipating them from anything.

On the other hand, it is creating a new bondage for them, and exactly such a phenomenon occurred which resulted in the creation of "the new women for the new patriarchy" as Partha Chatterjee states in his aforementioned essay. These new women who were provided education and later on managed the household and family were called

"Bhadromohila", civilised women, under the discourse of the then Indian nationalism. There was sexual politics involved here as these new "Bhadromohila" were assigned a fixed role and, again as stated before in the first paragraph of this study, those women who did not accept that category and fulfil its social obligations were addressed by derogatory terms.

Women were dictated, by the then Indian nationalist ideology and discourse, which had a power structure of its own due to the existence of nationalist conscience amongst individuals of then India, to take care of the private life, and men to take part in the public life, which created the "Ghare" (inside, private, internal)/ "Bahire" (outside, public, external) divide. Men had the power to take care of external affairs which included colonial administration and trade, based on which the middle class was born, and women had to take care of family, children and home.

The nationalist agenda made a synthesis of tradition and modernity by stating that men would take care of the public sphere where the British colonial system was superior to that of India, however, women were given the task of taking care of the harmony of the private life, of the inner "Ghare" sphere which, according to the Indian tradition, is the spiritual abode, the epitome of the traditional Indian values and such a place which the British can never acquire and never know the significance of. Therefore India, according to Ram Mohan Roy and his contemporaries, would be superior to the British as India would have both spiritual and material advantages. However in this process, women were used as a nationalist symbol to promote particular agendas as the thesis of this study claims, and their well-being was totally left into oblivion, well-being of both middle and elite-class Hindu women in 19th century Bengal, as well as the Hindu women who belonged to lower class and Muslim women, and the symbol of women weaved by Bengal Nationalists were so powerful that it provided an incomplete resolution of the Women's Question which was socially accepted as the women's question altogether ceased to be a matter of discussion and speculation.

The two particular aforementioned events show how women, in the Indian subcontinent, were victims of patriarchy, first in the form of colonialism. Then, nationalism, as less or no concern was given to their well-being, was socially constructed into bearing symbols that would carry forth colonial or nationalist agendas. Historically, perceiving these two events regarding the position of women is important if one is to see, and at the same time realise, how the inhuman viciousness, which the Indian subcontinent witnessed after the time of its Partition, battered women in every particular way. The Hindu Muslim Dangal after the partition was an era where human beings in the subcontinent were essentially categorised by their religions, and areas were politically positioned according to their geographical placement belonging to either India or Pakistan. Hindus who belonged to Lahore had to evacuate their homeland and come to India; millions of Muslims in Delhi had to move to Pakistan. In these movements caused by political upheavals, millions lost their families, and their identities, and also thousands had to live in exile in their homeland. The tragic and unimaginable conditions of women during the Hindu-Muslim dangal of the Partition and the years preceding 1947 can be best realised by looking at the stories of Fanon and Bhabha's works. The extent to which women were forced to be victims of violence, and then had to sacrifice to accept their circumstances and move on with their lives, those women who dared to move on with life as

most women either were killed after being raped or died due to suicide or hunger and malnutrition. In forward to the 1986 edition of Franz Fanon's seminal work *Black Skin, White Mask* Homi Bhabha writes that "No there can be no reconciliation, no Hegelian "recognition," no simple, sentimental promise of a humanistic world of the You…Unlike Fanon, I think the *non-dialectical* moment of Manicheanism suggests an answer" (Fanon,1986, p. 107). Bhabha brings in the argument of Fanon using the Hegelian dialectics upon the phenomenon of colonisation and assuming that a possible synthesis between the colonisers and the colonised would eventually take place, following the trajectory of dialectics. If the colonisers are the thesis and the colonisers are the anti-thesis. Out of these two forces, a synthesis will occur where the boundaries between the colonisers and the colonised will vanish. However, Bhabha in the Forward to *Black Skin, White Mask* then states, as the aforementioned quote shows, that no such reconciliation is possible where there will be a humanistic world of "You", not you the colonisers or you the colonised.

Although Bhabha discussed in terms of the colonisers and the colonised, a similar spatial trajectorial analysis can be used to understand the passive position of women during and after the partition of 1947. Abducted women were subjugated by the colonisers; however, the level of subjugation, trauma, and inflicted violence which women experienced by the creation of two states based on religious grounds suggests conditions of many women did not improve after the "independence" of India and Pakistan. Women during the partition of India could never assimilate into the society like they were before. In numerous short stories written within the context of the 1947 partition of India, women who were forcefully abducted and raped, or "defiled" by men from the opposing religion, could not become a part of their society. The social values of both India and Pakistan were grounded in their religious beliefs. Women who were not only raped but raped by men from opposing religions; or impregnated by men of opposing religions, forced to follow and embrace the rituals of the opposing religions for survival, were looked down upon.

In cases where they were not looked down upon and their former husbands or companions intended to "respect" them, this attitude was far from the normative patriarchal context which existed before the partition. Rajindra Shing Bedi's *Lajwanti* is one such story where the main character, Lajwanti, a woman forcefully taken in Pakistan and then deported back to India, was loved by her husband. However, this love, kindness and happiness

> (…) was replaced by suspicion. This was not because Sunderlal had begun to mistreat her again, but because he continued to treat her with excessive kindness. Lajo didn't expect him to be so gentle… She wanted to be Lajo again, the woman who could quarrel with her husband over something trivial and then be caressed. The question of a fight didn't even arise. Sunderlal made her feel as if she was precious and fragile like glass, that she would shatter at the slightest touch… She began to gaze at herself in the mirror and came to the conclusion that she would never be Lajo again. (Bedi,2006, p. 13)

Earlier in the story Sunderlal, Lajwanti's husband, searches for her and decides never to quarrel with her if she is found. One can interpret the crucial part of the story to take place when Sunderlal debates in a local Hindu gathering where a debate ensues between whether Lord Ram was just suspecting the purity of Sita. Sunderlal concludes that Sita is pure and in front of the purity of Sita, even Lord Ram's judgement falls short and can be criticised.

One can argue that it is this image of Sita that Sunderlal reinforces in his wife after he discovers her in one of the deportation camps. In this story critiques of partition have been presented; it was not the will of these women who were kidnapped and raped. Women are perceived to be holy yet passive beings who are victims of far greater forces and destruction undertaken by systems of violence happening underneath the guise of the birth of two independent nations. Yet, no medium of discourse has been created (literary or sociological) which can attempt to understand the voices of these women and the anguish they have experienced. As this story displays, women have been positioned not only by discourses of nationalism and religion but also by their husbands and former family members. Lajwanti could quarrel before with her husband, and have a normal life.

Now, after the recovery, she cannot get over the experiences of her abduction by another Muslim man, nor can she reconcile with the excessive love and eroticisation which her husband displays due to his newly awakened religious affiliation to see her wife as Sita Ma. What the story begs from the readers is to understand the voice of Lajwanti, not as a Hindu woman kidnapped and recovered, but as a woman who was forced to get enmeshed in the liminal space of two traditions. She forgets after returning to independent India that she does not have to cover her head, a custom dictated upon Muslim women in various parts of the world. Her husband easily proclaims to forget the past and start a new beginning. The question is not to forget but to reconcile the past.

It can be concluded that despite recovering the partition of 1947 created a society of third space where women were colonised twice, first by the separation of two nations and getting forcefully deported or kidnapped; and second by the superimposed religious values which inevitably failed to understand the trauma of their body and being. The painful awareness and experiences of women about the partition could not be facilitated by any discourse, and many of their experiences remain within the invisible space of silence.

Urvashi Butalia demonstrates in her book *The Other Side of Silence* how the governments of Pakistan and India use the aforementioned circumstances and the status of women to uphold their national identities and impose their state ideology. Women's nations, which were characterised by their religions, defined them. The Indian government faced harsh criticism for its lack of decisive action and for remaining in a pacifist stance while waiting for the right response from the Pakistani government. This was after India and Pakistan made a formal agreement to return all Indian girls who were left or abducted in Pakistan. If the need arose, a lot of people and publications were prepared to launch an open war with Pakistan. The abducted Indian women were referred to as all the "Sitas" that the Ram, the nation's men, had to rescue. This was one of the main causes of the Indian nation's sense of urgency in rescuing the abducted women from Pakistan, as it was perceived as "a challenge to our manhood, no less than to our nationalism" (Butalia, 2003, p. 213).

However, the women who were kidnapped in Pakistan and sold for rupees and annas were referred to as "Mohammad ki joru"—that is, Muhammad's wife (Butalia, 2003). Depending on the national ideology, women were given different names by males who used

them to further their own goals, such as in India, or to sell them for profit and brag about the conversion of Hindu women to Islam. Men were assigned the duty of defending their "motherland," which their wives stood in for. The circumstances were exploited by *The Organizer*, an Indian weekly, to discredit Pakistani culture and paint the country's citizens as immoral. However, the publication claimed that Muslim women who were left in India but had relatives in Pakistan would "be sheltered by the Hindus," even though Muslim women in India were denied many fundamental human rights and were the targets of sexual assault. It needs to be contemplated that if, for example, all the Hindu women in India and all the Muslim women in Pakistan during the years which followed the Partition were sent to their own country, to their "homeland", would these women truly be able to enjoy the freedom they were being deprived of, a freedom that was promised to these women by both the nations. Women have consistently been oppressed in a culture that has structured its bureaucracy, business, and national identity on male dominance.

However, Indian writers and journalists regarded the women who were abducted and settled in Pakistan, adopting a new identity and religion, as a blemish on the sanctity and sacredness of Bharatmata. "Leaving one's home meant venturing into unfamiliar, unclean, and uncivilised territories, thus requiring a process of purification upon return" (Butalia, 2003, p. 15). Additionally, "When it came to women, the discussion shifted to a completely different level - one that revolved around the reputation of the nation and its male population" (Butalia,2003). In the first quote mentioned, the concept of Bahire (outside) being forbidden for women due to the belief that it was "impure" for them reflects the 19th-century nationalist pseudo-solution to the issue of women's rights. Even if these women were brought back to India, which many of them were, their lives were limited to being confined within the home, unable to assert their freedom. India, therefore, was largely motivated to repatriate these women to affirm their national identity.

Furthermore, numerous Hindu women want to migrate to Pakistan. In contrast, many Hindu women in India aspired to do so, mostly due to the improved social status they could attain compared to their homeland. In the narrative of Manto The Dutiful Daughter, the protagonist displays a strong aversion for her mother, fully embracing her altered identity and potentially benefiting from it. Both India and Pakistan were actively promoting their nationalist agendas, portraying women as "Sitas" or wives of Muhammad who were suffering. According to Urvashi Butalia, each woman who was taken away was either already a mother or could become one. This means that each lady could serve the Indian country. Women rarely experienced freedom in the days that followed the Partition of India, unless by happenstance and luck. Women did not have a country to call their own in two nations participating in a cold war and using women as a means to highlight to the world how pure their land was and how impure was the other land.

India was in a state of grief of losing a part of its land to men of other religions, and the only way to recover this grief was to recover the "Indian" women who were in Pakistan which, as mentioned before, they considered as a violation and rape of their motherland. The Indian nation-state needed to purify itself by recovering the "Sitas" from Pakistan, and Butalia writes this issue of using women to promote various agendas was and still is,

> (...) nothing new, for even today discussions that are said to be about women, often have little or nothing to do with them, but provide an opportunity to rehearse other agendas...women as a person did not count, her wishes were of little consequence, she had no right to resist, defy nor even to appeal, for the Act denied even that basic freedom...There is no escaping the question, then, that if women were so inconsequential in something that was so centrally of concern to them, what was it that lay at the heart of the recovery operation? National honor...(Butalia,2003, p. 64)

The aforementioned passage sums up the whole purpose of India, as well as Pakistan, to put on the guise of showing humanitarian concern about the position and suffering of women resulting from abduction and violence caused by the Partition of India, to promote their nationalist agendas.

Since the British colonial era, the positions of women have been continuously mediated based on the dominant cultural and political ideologies governing majoritarian values. These majoritarian values were constructed based on religious nationalism and strong identifications towards ethnolinguistic identities across South Asia. Whereas Pakistan further experienced a partition in 1971 based on religious grounds, its former territory of East Pakistan converted into Bangladesh prioritizing its ethno-linguistic identity over religious nationalism. However, in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh the majoritarian values related to nationalism were almost always based on religious sentiments. Sectarian communal ideologies have gained prominence in both India and Pakistan, and in Bangladesh the orthodox Sunni groups like Hefazat e Islam and Jamaat E Islami remain in the forefront in many of the nation's political activities. Within this context, it remains imperative to understand the ways the positions of women. This section of the study intends to comment on the position of women in India in light of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (henceforth BJP) Citizenship Amendment Acts (hence CAA) and its systematic exclusion of Muslims and Christians. This section intends to highlight how Muslim women of India still face ideological pressures based on religion which creates spaces of systematic exclusions. Muslim women of India are still faced with a superimposed ideology based on religious national sentiments. In following the central thesis of this study which is to study how women are used as symbols towards asserting religious and national ideologies, this section will explore the conditions of women in the late 20th and early 21st century South Asia.

Analyzing Alan Badiou's book *The Communist Hypothesis*, Slavoj Zizek writes,

> [2](…) Truth is rare, elusive, fragile, it is an Event discernible only in its ambiguous traces, an Event whose actuality cannot be demonstrated by the analysis of historical reality, but, is, rather, a king of 'regulative Idea'…Badiou…basically sustains the necessity of imaginary ideological illusion…by means of which the fragile real is inscribed into the symbolic fiction and thus gains the consistency of a part of positive social reality. (Badiou,2010, p. 55)

Gender can be understood as a regulative idea when contextualized within the majoritarian values governing nationalist and orthodox religious ideas. Social realities are symbols based on which modalities of human experiences are governed utilizing collective orthodox religious and

[2] From the book *Living in the End Times*, Chapter title *Bargaining.*

nationalist ideologies. As we have already seen, the Partition of 1947 created disjunctive fissures in the cultural and social history of the Indian Subcontinent which forced women to conform to orthodox religious and political narrative. Those who could not conform to the fervent religious nationalism were mentally, if not physically, displaced and experienced suppressed traumas.

In 2019 when the BJP amended the CAA it directly violated the Indian Constitution's Article 14 "which guarantees all citizens equal protection before the law, and Article 15, which prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex and place of birth" (Basu & Pathan, 2022, p. 109). In places like Assam Muslim women experience a hegemonic position on two levels; first due to the existing patriarchal values within both Hindu and Muslim religious establishments; and second because of the looming threat by the government towards creating spaces of exclusions based on revised citizenship status. Ideas of *jui soli* (birth within a territory) and *jui sanguinis* (right of blood) have regulated 1950s Britain due to the large influx of migrants from the colonies. These ideas are again used to scrutinize BJP's actions by critics and intellectuals. Once Britain used *jui sanguinis* to avoid providing citizenship status to the migrants from former colonies, and today India is using *jui sanguinis* by making religion the basis of citizenship status. Franz Fanon stated how nations in periods of decolonization will inevitably emulate the colonizers, "…the primary Manichaeism which governed colonial society is preserved intact during the period of decolonization; that is to say that the settler never ceases to be the enemy, the opponent, the foe that must be overthrown" (Fanon, 2001, p. 88).

In right-wing orthodox fundamentalist ideas of Religion, as endorsed by BJP, Muslims are historically perceived as settlers and hence there are efforts towards excluding them from being citizens of India. A woman in India who is culturally a Muslim, or who affiliates as a Muslim based on religious or any other spiritual affiliation will be perceived as an "outsider", and since the orthodox Muslim community regulates patriarchal values one can imagine the level of stigmatization women might face if they are victims of sexual abuse. Similarly, in Pakistan and Bangladesh women from the Hindu, Shia and other Sufi communities have been oppressed, both from socio-cultural as well as theological positions resulting in cases of sexual violence.

The International Secretariat of OMCT has received credible information about the gang rape of two minority women, Ms. Nilu Rani Das and Ms. Popy Rani Das, along with the theft of their belongings in Bangladesh. According to the report, on January 26, 2004, a group of at least nine men forcibly entered the residence of Ms. Nilu Rani Das, where they sexually assaulted her and her niece, Ms. Popy Rani Das, both belonging to the minority Hindu community (OMCT,2004). The heinous act of rape, particularly when wielded as a weapon against women from minority communities, serves as a chilling symbol of power and domination. In the case of Ms. Nilu Rani Das and Ms. Popy Rani Das, the brutal gang rape perpetrated against them not only inflicted physical and psychological trauma but also symbolized the broader oppression faced by their minority Hindu group.

This egregious violation of their bodies was not merely an isolated act of violence but a deliberate tactic to assert control, instill fear, and perpetuate a sense of vulnerability within the community. The perpetrators, emboldened by a culture of impunity and fueled by discriminatory attitudes, sought to silence and subjugate these women, using their bodies as

battlegrounds in a larger conflict driven by religious and social divisions. Such acts of sexual violence not only devastate individual lives but also serve to reinforce systemic inequalities and perpetuate cycles of oppression, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive measures to combat gender-based violence and protect the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their background or identity.

The harrowing accounts of abduction, forced conversion, and rape endured by young Hindu girls and women in parts of Sindh serve as stark reminders of how women are systematically targeted and treated based on their religion, often becoming symbols of oppression in the process. These incidents reflect a disturbing pattern where vulnerable women, primarily from the Hindu community, are preyed upon, their fundamental rights violated, and their lives shattered by perpetrators who seek to enforce their own agendas through coercion and violence.

The latest in a series of such crimes against members of the minority community, a married Hindu girl kidnapped from Pakistan's southern Sindh region claims she was raped and threatened to convert to Islam by her captors when she refused to change her faith (The Indian Express, 2024). In these cases, women are not seen as individuals with agency and autonomy but rather as pawns in a larger game of religious and cultural domination. Their identities are weaponized against them, as they are forced to abandon their faith, convert to Islam, and submit to marriages arranged against their will. The perpetrators, driven by a toxic mix of religious extremism and patriarchal control, view these women as disposable objects to be manipulated and discarded at will. Moreover, the fact that these atrocities continue unabated underscores the failure of authorities to protect the rights and dignity of women from minority communities.

Despite the widespread condemnation of such practices, the perpetrators operate with impunity, emboldened by a system that often turns a blind eye to their crimes. The plight of these women highlights the urgent need for concerted efforts to address the root causes of religious intolerance and gender-based violence. It is imperative to challenge the deeply ingrained attitudes and prejudices that allow such atrocities to persist and to ensure that all women, regardless of their religion or background, are afforded the basic human rights and protections they deserve. Only through collective action and unwavering commitment to justice can we hope to dismantle the systems of oppression that continue to oppress and exploit women based on their religious identity. Thus, one can conclude that the situation of women of the subcontinent during 1947 did not change today as collective orientations towards women are based on ideas of religion and nationality.

Conclusion

There are silent voices of suffering among many Diaspora communities, voices that are eventually drowned out by historical master narratives. Many people have endured pains and agonising experiences that may hold significance for humanity's collective awareness, but master narratives like nationalists' history purposefully obscure them. Nonetheless, it is crucial to find the voices of the women who were compelled to remain silent and who were marginalised as a result of shifting political landscapes and power dynamics in the transnational feminism context. These women's silences will be shattered if their voices are reclaimed and

"renarrativized," and they will contribute to the critique of the dominant patriarchal narrative—whether it takes the shape of nationalism or something else entirely. Then maybe a greater portion of humanity will realise and experience that no matter which ruler arrived and took control of the situation, the ruled, the women, always remained the same. Women have been used by communal, colonial, or nationalist agendas throughout human history. In the process, the voice of their anguish and suffering was lost in the vast and deep oceans of time.

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