



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 10. Issue.3. 2023 (July-Sept.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

FEMALE NARRATIVES OF PARTITION AS SEEN THROUGH FILMS, AND HOW THEY
BREAK DOWN THE SINGULAR HISTORICAL "TRUTH"

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Article information

Received:03/8/2023
Accepted:07/8/2023
Published online:09/8/2023
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.10.3.68](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.10.3.68)

ABSTRACT

Partition in India came in the wake of Independence. While Independence ushered in a new era of freedom, possibilities, national identities, Partition, on the other hand, snatched away many of these. Partition affected people belonging to different classes, castes, sexes, religions and such categories- both in a similar way in certain aspects, and differently in certain other aspects.

Partition had immense and devastating consequences for women. The women caught in the situation had particularly different experiences than men who were caught in a similar situation. Besides the violence perpetrated, the loss of land, property, the separation from family, friends, loved ones, loss of means of survival, there were different kinds of struggles that had to be faced by women, which were particularly heightened for them.

A huge number of women were subject to sexual violence, rape, assault and such others. Identities were snatched away from women in ways more than those of men. Many families did not want to accept the women back on the grounds that they were defamed, "polluted" and such others. Besides, kidnappings, forced marriages, and such other forms of oppression were perpetrated on women during the time. Commodification of women increased at a high rate. Also, various kinds of masked oppressions against women existed at the time.

Many films as well as short films which look in retrospect at the partition situation of India, throw light on these varied traumatic experiences of women, which were before this, largely hidden under the shadow of collective experiences of partition, and not seen separately from the male experiences, at least in the field of films.

Short films such as *Mubadala*, films such as *Pinjar*, *Komal Gandhar*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Subarnarekha* throw light on the condition of women trapped within this situation, facing trauma that was peculiarly different from other sections of the society.

These films break down the singular narrative of historical "truth" with numerous separate counter-narratives, which are distinctly separate from the narratives of other sections of the society caught in the similar situation. It shows that narratives, even narratives from the opposite side of the power hierarchy, is not always complete- that each narrative is incomplete, and has within it, assumed narratives of other sections-perhaps the marginalized within the marginalized sections- that go

untold, and until and unless special attention is given in order to search their "particular truth", they remain hidden in the "collective generalized truth" and thus many aspects of them remain unseen.

Keywords: female narratives, partition, films, historical "truth", "particular truth", "collective generalized truth"

The partition of India in 1947, came in the wake of Independence, making the scenario so devastating that it appeared an extremely high cost to be paid. While Independence ushered in a new era of freedom, possibilities, self-identities, national identities, it came along with the breaking of a nation into two which snatched away not only many of these new found blessings of Independence, but also much more. It was often said that in those times, land had at least some value, but human lives had none. Partition ushered in a new level of communal violence in the country. It affected almost all the people, to varying extents, in varying ways.

It affected people of different religions, communities, classes, castes, sexes, ages, places- both in similar ways, upto certain degrees, in certain aspects, and in different ways in other aspects. Partition snatched away from people their homes, their properties, their loved ones, their mode of survival, their identities, their families and such others. Countless people lost their lives. A majority of those who survived became homeless, starved, dishonored, lost- a mere traumatized shadow of themselves.

Women faced immense and devastating consequences during the time of Partition. Women, on both the sides were similarly oppressed and tortured. Women who were caught in Partition had remarkably different experiences from men who were caught in the same situation. Certain forms of violence, certain degrees of oppression were particularly heightened for women during the times of Partition.

A vast number of women were subject to sexual violence during the time, besides other forms of violence. Rape, assault, sexual crimes were rampant, and were spreading uncontrollably. Identities of women were snatched away in more ways than that of men. Kidnappings, forced marriages spread like wildfire. Also, numerous families refused to take back the women into their families, even after them being rescued, because they considered that these women were "polluted", defamed, and that their identities- national, communal, sexual, class, caste and otherwise had been smudged. The families considered taking these women back into their homes and families as a matter of shame.

Commodification of women increased at an alarming rate at the time. Also women were dishonored as at that time, the honor of the women were considered to be also the honor of the family, and the enmity that arose between the religions, among common people, made way for more dishonoring of women, in order to defame the family or the household of the rival religion.

Mass killings were of course rampant, but women were also targeted specially, apart from being within the general public, as subjects of a different form and degree of violence.

Many films and short films look in retrospect to the violence perpetrated during Partition, and through them, it is possible to identify the specific narratives of women during Partition- their specific struggles and oppressions, which was before these largely seen within the greater narrative of general struggle during Partition, with the male narrative as the dominating narrative, and all struggles, including separate female struggles, falling within this greater narrative. These films and short films bring to light the varied experiences of women during partition, which were earlier seen in the shadow of collective experiences, and not seen separately from male experiences, at least in the field of films.

Short films such as *Mubadala*, films such as *Pinjar*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar*, *Subarnarekha*, *Rajkhanini* or the remake, *Begum Jaan*, *Zakhm*, *Qissa*, *Gadar*, and movies made from books such as *Train to Pakistan*, *Manto*, *Tamas* and such others, show the condition, the oppression, the plight and struggles of women caught in the situation, and how they were particularly different from other sections of the society. This paper would look at the female narratives of Partition through the short film, *Mubadala*, and the films, *Pinjar* and *Begum Jaan*.

In the short film, *Mubadala*, such experiences of women during Partition are brought to light. It portrays the tale of a woman who had been bought by a man, Iqbal at a fair, and how she is exchanged during Partition, like a commodity. The woman is not given any name or considerable dialogue with any other adults in the film, which are symbolic of her lack of identity, and her muted existence.

Right after the beginning of the film, in two consequent scenes, a stark contrast is seen. While the woman is seen moving away, not even showing her face in public, to people like Alam, who was a friend of the man who bought her, the man is seen casually urinating in public. The scenes closely follow one another, which intensifies the effect. While this might not come across as an incident of huge magnitude or consequences, yet it lays the ground for portraying the different forms of experiences and existence of men and women, which was present throughout history, but heightened in events like the Partition.

Then while the men are seen enjoying themselves, the woman is constantly seen performing chores-cooking, cleaning, serving breakfast, and even standing and fanning the men as they have breakfast. She is not seen eating, resting, or tending to herself much or entertaining herself like the men. Her own needs and desires seem to have taken a backseat, and she seems to be performing the role of an obedient slave to the men.

The two men discuss the woman's price just like an object. Iqbal asks Alam how much did she cost, and comments that she seemed expensive. They completely negate her human identity, her dignity, and reduce her to the position of a commodity which is present to fulfil their needs and desires.

Alam then asks Iqbal why he does not marry her. To this Iqbal replies that he does not know what religion she belongs to. This portrays the heightened antagonistic feelings of people towards other religions during the time of Partition, and the intolerance and suspicion in the minds of common people at the time, about people of other religions. The short film is set at the time of Partition, and it brings forth a different kind of social aspect than what meets the eye at the first glance in history.

Women were doubly oppressed at the time- first, for their respective religions as there was religious antagonism on both sides, and second, they were further oppressed for being women.

When Alam keeps on staring at the woman while having breakfast, Iqbal compares the woman to a dessert, and tells Alam that he can have the dessert after food. Both the men feel free to lust over the woman, and pass derogatory remarks about her, right in front of her.

The only person the woman seems to talk to is the little boy who is also the only person who treats her like a human being, and not like a desire-fulfilling machine. It is also the only time a hint of smile is seen on her face. In fact, that is the only time; any form of expression is seen on her face, because in other times, she is seen in an expressionless, despaired existence.

After the Partition, when Alam decided to shift to Pakistan, he decided to split his business property which he and Iqbal jointly owned. They discuss and argue about the splitting, and finally, Alam says that Iqbal can keep the money that has been running in the market, but only if he gives the woman to him. At this Iqbal says that he had sold his watch in order to buy her, to which Alam replies that she must be cheaper than his bicycle. They bargain about her price just like a mere commodity, an object they could easily buy and sell.

Finally, Iqbal agrees to give the woman to Alam in exchange for his bicycle, and they settle this deal. At this the child points out that his father says that exchanging commodities is considered wrong in their religion. To this, Iqbal jokingly says that he would then pay a rupee to avoid that.

The bargaining between the two men highlight how men have easily commoditized the woman, and buy, sell or exchange her like a mere object. She is not allowed to have her identity as a human being, and she has no power to take any decision of her own, even ones that concern her life, future and herself. The woman is reduced to a mere body, which is present only for the service to men.

Also, the sexual gratification that men seek from her, for which they buy or sell her, suggests the numerous times that she might have been raped because her consent was not even taken into consideration. She is seen to be extremely quiet, with a hint of fear and despair which is always present in her. When the child

says that he would teach her how to ride a bicycle, her expressions make it felt that she is aware of the futility of her dreams, which can never match her horrific reality. She also seems to have no hope of escaping from her present condition.

At the end of the film Iqbal is seen taking the bicycle of Alam which was parked outside his house, and bringing it in his courtyard, while the woman is seen going with Alam. The woman has no say over any decisions of her life. She is compelled to do what men say, go wherever they send or take her, to whoever they sell her, or give her.

She travels from one unknown world to another, sold to a man in exchange for a bicycle, by a man who bought her at a fair. In the process, the national identity of the woman also changes because she would now be going with Alam who is going to go to Pakistan. In this no conscious decision of her plays any part. In this and many other ways, during Partition, identities of women on both sides were altered without taking into consideration their opinions. Women's destiny, their actions, their roles were determined by patriarchy. This has been the case from time immemorial, but it was intensified during Partition. Men too lost national identities, but numerous women lost human identities too, besides losing national identity.

In the film, *Pinjar*, the devastating effects of Partition on women is seen through numerous scenes in the movie. Firstly, a pre-partition era is shown, and how even in that time women were the victims of communal antagonism is brought to the fore. A particular person belonging to a Hindu family had abducted a woman belonging to a Muslim family and married her. To seek revenge, years after, a man from the Muslim family abducts a woman, Puro from the same Hindu family and marries her. The presence of a brewing trouble and religious rivalry is seen to be present on both the sides even before the partition, and this rivalry is meted out by violence and oppression on women.

Then came the time of Partition, when these oppressions on women increased manifold. Besides the violence and oppression that each side meted out to the minorities in them, women were especially targeted for specific forms of oppression over and beyond the general oppression meted out to all. Countless women were kidnapped during this time, and kept captive. Sexual and physical abuse was meted out to them, some were raped and left to die, others were brutally murdered, some had body parts cut off, and the list is endless.

In the film, it is seen through numerous instances. A woman whom Puro rescues from the fields says that they were crossing the border, and had stopped in a camp. The camp was even given security by the border forces, but still, men would come at night and pick up young women from there, and dump them back the next morning. She says that it had been nine consecutive nights and she has had to go to nine different men's places. She ran away the previous night, and was hiding in the fields. This suggests the unspeakable sexual violence and abuse meted out to women during the time of Partition.

Another instance of the film is the kidnapping of Lajo, Puro's sister-in-law. It is seen that they were on their way to cross the border, when suddenly a group of men attacked them. They too were protected by police force and army personnel, yet even amongst this, they kidnapped Lajo. She is seen to be abducted and forcibly kept in her perpetrator's place, which was actually her place, but was now captured by the perpetrator. These forms of violence were specific to women and were meted out to them, especially them, besides the violence meted out to them as a whole group of religious minority, which included men, women, children and all others.

In the conversations of different characters too, a different form of oppression is seen meted out to women. In one instance, two old men after the partition, are seen speaking that the authorities on both sides are trying to rescue and bring back the women abducted on both sides. They say if more women from one side are released, then there are chances that more women from the other side would be released too. This shows the special oppressive experience that particularly women went through during the time of partition.

Also, oppression was meted out to women by their own families too. Many families refused to take back the rescued women into their households, because they considered these women as being "polluted", "contaminated", as being a matter of shame to own them, and therefore rejected them. In the movie, it is seen in the case of Lajo, who fears that she might not be accepted back into the family because she was abducted.

However, she was finally accepted. Puro, however, who was kidnapped in a pre-partition time, when her family was a minority in the area, was not accepted back into her family, even though she had come back to the household by sneaking out of her kidnapper's house. Her family told her that if they accepted her back, there might be an attack on the household. Her father also told her that since no one would marry her because she was abducted, she would be a liability to them for their entire lives. He also says that he would also not be able to marry off his other two daughters if she stayed in the household.

This shows the evils of patriarchy that existed in the family, and that women could not feel safe even in their own households, where they could be betrayed or oppressed at any moment. It also brings forth the social evils that would make the families betray the women in them, that made marriage the sole and most important purpose of a woman's life, and that without marriage a woman was considered a burden. Also, even within this form of oppression, there were more forms of oppression seen through the movie. No one would be willing to marry the woman because she was abducted, which was no fault of hers. Also, even keeping the abducted woman in the household was a shame, but this was not the case for the perpetrator, whose fault it actually was. Patriarchy made women the victim of oppression, and treated them as the people at fault as well.

In the film, *Begum Jaan*, the harsh realities of oppression are seen through numerous instances. Near the beginning of the film, the girl whom Begum Jaan names Shabnam seems to be a victim of Partition violence that was meted out to women. She was physically and sexually assaulted, and after that her own family refused to accept her back into their home, and left her in a brothel. The human being in the girl was suppressed by both her assaulters and her family members. While one just used her as an object of satisfying lust and projecting violence due to communal antagonism, the other abandoned her as they now saw her as an object of shame, with the new identity of an assaulted girl being added to her name. She was seen just as a commodity to fit into specific roles or fulfil specific purposes. She was traumatized to such measures that she was unable to talk or perform her everyday works properly. She is also seen to have become mute and expressionless like the woman from the short film, *Mubadala*. In fact, all the women in the brothel are seen to have similar histories in their past. Begum Jaan herself was married off at a young age, and when she became a widow, she was thrown out of the household and left in Banaras, where she was sold to a brothel.

A character in the film, Harshvardhan, on replying to his friend Ilias, says that his wife has just escaped narrowly from being raped, and he is not sure if his mother was raped or not as she would not say anything, but keep on weeping. Ilias, on the other hand, gives the account of his wife being assaulted too. He said that the assaulted took off her clothes, and killed her, and then burnt her. He said that even though everything happened in front of him, he could not do anything. Both Harshvardhan and Ilias were high-positioned government officers with considerable power, yet they too could do nothing to prevent or stop the violence perpetrated on the female members of their own families. This shows the extreme level of violence that was widespread on both sides during Partition. Violence against women during the time of Partition was not only physical, like the violence that was perpetrated on men. Rather, the violence perpetrated on women was targetedly sexual. The film also portrays that how people in power like the king, the police officer, who were supposed to protect the people and help prevent the oppression, themselves took advantage of the helpless condition of women at the time, and tortured and oppressed them sexually and physically. Also, in the group of the professional goon, Kabir, there were specific forms of violence that they had in store particularly for women. Also, in the case of Gulabo, it is seen how the master promises to marry her and makes her run away, and finally betrays her and gives her away to perpetrators. He says he does this to punish the girl and "arrogant" Begum Jaan, who had done no harm to him. She had only refused his proposal, and therefore he took his revenge by oppressing another woman to indirectly hurt Begum Jaan because he made Gulabo abandon Begum Jaan by lying to her. The harsh realities of women at the time of Partition are also seen through certain comments of Begum Jaan. When the master asks her why she is not celebrating the Independence that they had just received, Begum Jaan replies that Independence is just for men. The women will continue to face oppression as they always have. This turns out to be true as seen during the time of Partition, where oppression of women were intensified and widespread. At the end of the film, it is seen that Kabir's group, after destroying the brothel, which was the home of Begum Jaan and her group of women, making them homeless, killing over half of them, and evicting

them from their home- which was their original motive, do not stop. They plan on raping these women, taking advantage that they were prostitutes, but moreover that they were women, because during Partition, women were seen as only bodies which they used as a tool for perpetrating another level of violence. These films portray another side of the narrative of oppression that people faced during Partition.

They give the narrative from a female point of view, and talk about their experiences. They break down the singular narrative of historical "truth" with numerous separate counter-narratives, which are distinctly separate from the narratives of other sections of the society caught in the same situation. It shows that narratives, even narratives from the opposite side of the power hierarchy, is not always complete- that each narrative is incomplete, and has within it, assumed narratives of other sections- perhaps the marginalized within the marginalized sections- that go untold, and until and unless special attention is given in order to search their "particular truth", they remain hidden in the "collective generalized truth" and thus many aspects of them remain unseen.

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