



The Intersection of Gender and Religion: Women's Experiences of Partition Violence

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ABSTRACT

The Partition of India in 1947 was not only a geopolitical event but also a profound human tragedy that unleashed widespread violence, particularly affecting women across religious communities. This research paper explores the intersection of gender and religion in the context of Partition violence, focusing on how women's experiences were shaped by their religious identities. Drawing on the short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan Chander, the paper examines the different forms of violence inflicted on Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh women, highlighting how these acts were often justified or intensified by religious differences. Through a close reading of selected texts, the study reveals how Manto and Chander portrayed the gendered dimensions of communal violence, where women's bodies became sites of both religious and nationalistic contestation. By analyzing the depiction of abduction, rape, forced conversions, and honor killings, this research underscores the complex and multifaceted impact of Partition on women, whose suffering was compounded by the intersection of their gender and religion.

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most significant and traumatic events in modern history. The Indian freedom struggle culminated in the creation of two separate nations: India and Pakistan. This division led to an enormous and forced migration, with Sikhs and Hindus moving to India and Muslims relocating to Pakistan. As a result of this mass migration, approximately one million people lost their lives, around seventy-five thousand women were raped and abducted, and about twelve million people were displaced, losing their homes, properties, and families. The announcement of Partition brought immense uncertainty and fear, making it difficult for people to determine their future amidst the chaos. The Partition of India was not a decision made by the ordinary people but was imposed upon the citizens of an undivided India. Urvashi Butalia in her book *The Other Side of Silence* shows the clear picture of partition in these words,

Thousands of families were divided, homes were destroyed, crops left to rot, villages abandoned. Astonishingly and despite many warning the new government of India and Pakistan were unprepared for the convulsion. They had not anticipated that the fear and uncertainty created by the drawing of borders based on headcounts of religious identity, so many Hindus versus so many Muslims would force people to flee to what they would be surrounded by their kind. (Butaliya, 1998)

Literature serves as a powerful medium to showcase the atrocities and brutalities of the past. Many writers in Asian fiction depict the conditions of women during the Partition era, as women were among the most affected victims. Kidnapping, mutilation, rapes, forced conversions, and marriages were some of the brutalities committed against women during this time. As the most famous writer Amrita Pritam captures the loss of partition in her poem *Ajj Akhan Waris Shah Nu* (Today I ask Waris Shah). This poem shows the violence against women in the communal riots at the time of partition When the women were abducted. Raped, tortured and sold.

Waris Shah I call out to you today rise from your grave

.....

A million daughters weep today and look at you for solace

Rise O beloved of the aggrieved just look at your Punjab

Today corps haunts the woods, Chenab overflows with blood

.....”

-Amrita Pritam

---Translated from the Punjabi by Nirupama Dutt (Dutt, Scroll.in. 14 August 2017)

The present study focuses on the short stories of two prominent 20th-century Urdu writers, Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan Chander. Both authors vividly depict the brutality committed against women during the Partition. Manto’s short stories, such as *Open It*, *Bitter Harvest*, and *Colder than Ice* are powerful representations of the horrors of Partition, clearly illustrating the victimization of women. Similarly, Krishan Chander’s *Peshawar Express* and *A Courtesan’s Letter* portray the terrifying realities of that era.

Manto’s literary genius is evident in his use of fiction to provide a clear and poignant picture of the suffering endured by people during Partition. His works are renowned for their insightful portrayal of India’s Partition. As Ayesha Jalal wrote about Manto, “*With faith in that kind humanity, Manto wrote fascinating short stories about the human tragedy of 1947 that are internationally acknowledged for representing the plight of displaced and terrorized humanity with exemplary impartiality and empathy.*” (Jalal, 1996)

The short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan Chander provide a poignant and nuanced representation of gendered violence during the Partition of India in 1947. Manto and Chander, through their vivid storytelling and stark realism, illuminate the complex intersections of gender, violence, and identity during this tumultuous time. Their works not only document the physical and psychological traumas endured by women but also critique the patriarchal structures and communal politics that perpetuated such atrocities.

By examining the short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan Chander, this paper argues that their representation of gendered violence during Partition not only documents historical atrocities but also serves as a critical commentary on the socio-political dynamics that engendered such violence. Their works remain profoundly relevant, offering insights into the ongoing struggles against gender-based violence and the importance of remembering and addressing historical traumas.

Khol Do tells a story of a young girl named Sakina, who is raped multiple times by different groups of men during her search for her father, Sirajuddin. The harrowing narrative ends with her lifeless body

responding mechanically to a doctor's command to 'open it,' revealing the depth of her trauma and dehumanization. Manto's use of stark realism forces readers to confront the brutal realities of gendered violence. For instance,

The doctor looked at the prostrate body and felt for the pulse. Then he said to the old man, pointing at the window, 'Open it.'

The young women on the stretcher moved slightly. Her hand groped for the cord that kept her shalwar tied round her waist. With painful slowness, she unfastened it, pulled the garment down and opened her thighs. (Manto, 1997)

It shows the mental condition of Sakina as so traumatized and lost her senses completely and thinks that khol do is only means to open her salwar and surrender her to be raped again. This short story depicts the chaos and depravity of the refugee camps during India's partition. We can see Sirajuddin needs help and sympathy but no 'help and sympathy' existed at the time of partition. This story is a great example of how even the self appointed social workers were not trustworthy at the time of partition. The condition of women was very poor and disfigurement and mutilation were the most horrific kinds of brutality against women.

Menon and Bhasin in their book *Border and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* remarks about women,

We saw many who had been raped and disfigured, their faces and breasts scarred, and then abandoned They had tooth marks all over them. Their families said, 'How can we keep them now? Better that they are dead.' Many of them were so young-18, 15, 14 years old- what remained of them now? Their character was now spoilt. One had been raped by ten or more men- her father burnt her. (Menon and Bhasin, 2004)

Another short story *Sharifan (Bitter Harvest)* powerfully illustrates the gendered violence that women faced during the Partition. Sharifan's story is a representation of the widespread atrocities committed against women, including abduction, rape, and murder. The story highlights the destructive power of communal hatred and how it led to unimaginable violence. Manto critiques the blind hatred that fueled the attacks, leading to the suffering of innocent people like Sharifan. This story opens in a way, "*On the floor was the nearly naked body of a young girl, her small upturned breasts pointing at the ceiling as*

she lay on her back. He wanted to scream but he couldn't he turned his face away and said in a soft, grief-stricken voice, 'Sharifan.'”(Manto 1997)

This is the story of a man named Qasim who discovers the lifeless bodies of his mutilated wife and raped daughter Sharifan. This trauma of witnessing the brutality done to his wife and daughter filled Qasim with rage and wants to take revenge. He lost his senses and ran out of his houses and reenacts the same brutality that is done to his daughter on his Hindu neighbors' daughter. “*Qasim threw away the axe and pounced on her like a wild beast, throwing her to the ground. Then he began to tear at her clothes and for half an hour he ravaged her like an animal gone berserk. There was no resistant; she had fainted.*” (Manto, 1997)

In this story we can see a microscopic insight into the rape of women and how their bodies became bearers of religious identities. When Qasim reaches a house where he can see a girl, he first asks her who she is. The girl replies; ‘I am a Hindu.’ This incident clearly shows that in order to carry out the cycle of revenge successfully, there should be two identity marks- first is the identification of a female and the other is her religion.

This story is beautifully captures the brutal realities of the Partition through the lens of one woman's tragic experience. Manto's realistic and empathetic portrayal of Sharifan's suffering serves as a poignant reminder of the atrocities committed during this dark chapter in history. The story remains a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the need to remember and learn from the past.

Krishan Chander's works also employ a realistic style to depict the suffering of women during Partition. Stories like *Peshawar Express* and *A Courtesan's Letter* offer a grim portrayal of the era's gendered violence. *Peshawar Express* is set on a train journey, a common setting for many Partition narratives. It describes the experiences of women who are abducted, raped, and murdered during their forced migration. Chander's detailed and realistic depiction of the journey serves as a microcosm of the larger horrors of Partition.

Throughout the story, Krishan Chander displays his anguish at the violence which could result in murders and rapes. The most affecting incident in the story comes when the train reaches at Wajirabad station. Wajirabad was famous for its Vaisakhi festival among the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs whereas this short story witnesses the ultimate form of human depravity, dead bodies of Hindus and Sikhs are

scattered on the same station and with their daughters and wives a group of Muslim men celebrate the Vaishakhi in a way by making them naked on the station.

Wajirabad station was littered with dead bodies. Perhaps these people had come to see Vaishakhi fair. The loud applause of the crowd were also heard nearby the station. Within a minute the crowd reached the station, villagers were dancing and singing and behind them a crowd of naked women were walking, the young women, old women, young girls, grandmothers and granddaughters, mothers and wives and daughters were dancing on the tunes of men. (Chander)

This is how the train narrates its story and in its entire journey, thousands of people, people from both the countries and of all communities suffer a huge amount of loss and trauma. Krishan Chander's *Peshawar Express* perfectly captures the essence of human powerlessness. Thus the story contemplates the identity crisis of the refugees, how they were butchered and devastated before they could move to a new land.

The gendered violence depicted in Manto and Chander's stories reflects the historical realities of Partition. Women were not just collateral damage; they were targeted as symbols of community honor and subjected to extreme forms of violence. This paper provides a historical overview of the gendered violence during Partition, drawing connections to the narratives presented by Manto and Chander. Both writer critique the patriarchal and communal structures that perpetuated violence against women. Their stories reveal how women's bodies became battlegrounds for religious and communal conflicts. This critique is essential for understanding the socio-political dynamics of Partition and the pervasive impact of patriarchy.

The psychological trauma experienced by women during Partition is a recurring theme in both authors' works. Manto and Chander delve into the long-lasting impact of violence on women's identities and psyches, providing a deeper understanding of the scars left by Partition. Stories like *Toba Tek Singh* and *Siyah Hashiye* (by Manto) and *Hum Vehsi Hai* and *Amritsar Azadi ke Bad* (by Chander) illustrate the fragmented identities and the loss of agency faced by women during and after the violence. Through their empathetic portrayal of women, Manto and Chander humanize the victims of gendered violence, urging readers to acknowledge their suffering and resilience. This humanization serves as a powerful tool for advocating social justice and recognizing the need for healing and reconciliation.

Their short stories provide a vivid and poignant representation of gendered violence during Partition. Through their use of literary realism, they document historical atrocities and offer critical commentary on the socio-political dynamics that engendered such violence. Their works remain profoundly relevant, offering insights into the ongoing struggles against gender-based violence and the importance of remembering and addressing historical traumas.

Their narratives emphasize the intersectionality of gender and violence, highlighting how women's bodies became battlegrounds for religious and communal conflicts. By focusing on women's experiences, they reveal the gender-specific impacts of Partition violence, which have often been marginalized in historical accounts.

Both authors critique the patriarchal and communal systems that commodified and victimized women. Manto's blunt portrayal of sexual violence and Chander's satirical take on human savagery expose the complicity of societal structures in perpetuating gendered violence. Through their empathetic portrayal of women, Manto and Chander humanize the victims of gendered violence, urging readers to acknowledge their suffering and resilience. This humanization serves as a powerful tool for advocating social justice and recognizing the need for healing and reconciliation.

Conclusion

The Partition of India in 1947 marked one of the most violent and traumatic periods in South Asian history, where the intersection of gender and religion played a critical role in shaping the experiences of women. This study has explored how Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan Chander, through their poignant and often harrowing short stories, vividly depicted the gendered dimensions of Partition violence. Women, regardless of their religious affiliations, found themselves at the mercy of a patriarchal and communal society that saw their bodies as extensions of religious and national honor, leading to heinous acts of violence such as abduction, rape, forced conversions, and honor killings. The analysis of these narratives reveals that the violence inflicted upon women was not merely incidental to the political and communal upheaval of Partition, but rather a calculated and systemic manifestation of the deep-rooted religious and patriarchal structures that governed society. Manto and Chander's works serve as powerful critiques of these structures, exposing the ways in which women were doubly marginalized—first by the violence itself, and then by the societal norms that sought to silence their suffering and erase their agency. By bringing to light the intersection of gender and religion in the context of Partition violence, this research underscores the necessity of viewing historical events through a lens that considers the

complex interplay of multiple identities. The paper highlights the importance of continuing to explore and document women's experiences during Partition, not only to preserve their stories but also to ensure that future generations learn from this dark chapter in history. Through a deeper understanding of how gender and religion intersected to shape these experiences, we can better appreciate the resilience of those who survived and the need for a more inclusive historical narrative that honors their memory.

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