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Representing subjugation
Or, the figure of the woman in Partition history

This paper interrogates the reparative possibilities of representing subjugated voices in historical narratives. It examines, first, the onto-epistemic conditions under which this representation becomes possible. Further, it demonstrates that the possibility of representation is contingent upon the reproduction of the subjugated subject as a signifier of onto-epistemic difference. This form of representation fails to repair the harm underlying subjugation. The paper concludes by demonstrating the need for telling more ‘surprising’ stories that unravel material and symbolic attachments to the given onto-epistemic order. The argument proceeds through an engagement with the figure of the woman as she circulates in the histories of the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan. In particular, it engages the figure of the martyred woman and the abducted woman as they emerge in testimony and film, respectively.

Keywords: representation, trauma, reparation, historical narratives, women, Partition.

This paper seeks to unsettle the ethical potential of counter or recuperative histories. Specifically, it questions the reparative possibilities of projects that seek to recover and represent subjugated voices within ethico-political formations, such as community and nation. The paper takes the 1947 Partition of India\(^1\) as a point of departure.

Within much of the Indian sub-continent, Partition marks a singular moment. It marks the triumphal moment of Independence marred by the materialisation of brutal communal violence; the birth of divided nations actualised through the divisions of land and people; and an event of collective trauma that still breathes into the cultural and historical lives of these nations (cf. Kabir, 2005, Saeed, 2009).

Partition is of particular consequence to the experiences of those subjugated within the nation. In the case of India, they include religious minorities such as Muslims and Sikhs, those subject to caste oppression such as Dalits, and women across all these communities. For each of these, Partition instigated a renewed reckoning of belonging within the (Hindu-majority, Brahmin-centric) nation-state – a negotiation of their position within the nation and their role in the project of nation-building. Within official records, these figures enter history primarily as political objects whose terms of inclusion in the nation are a matter of public contestation and debate. Yet the lived experiences of these subjugated ‘others’ exceed those represented in official Partition histories. The lived history of Partition is one of genocidal violence – of material, social and psychic destruction. It is the history of ‘a rending of the land [that] caused the rending of hearts, communities, families, the tearing up of ethics and sense of morality itself’ (Mohanram, 2011, p. 921).

Significant efforts have been made therefore to recover the ‘true meaning of Partition’ for those bearing its scars (Chakravarty, 2018, p. 94). In the years immediately following the event,\(^1\)

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\(^1\) This refers to the 1947 event that saw the division of colonial India into postcolonial (Hindu-majority) India and (Muslim-majority) Pakistan. Pakistan (then, East and West Pakistan) attained Independence from the British on August 14th, 1947, followed by India, on August 15th. On March 26th, 1971, East Pakistan declared its independence from the West, as Bangladesh.
attempts were made through literature and film to represent its terror and ‘madness’ – to ‘[write] about what cannot be written’ (Jain quoted in Chakravarty, 2018, p. 96). The brutal stories of Sadat Hasan Manto, for instance, exemplify this work. Some decades later, the anti-Sikh pogroms of 1984 – an event that was felt to be ‘just like Partition’ – further catalysed an interest in understanding ‘what really happened’. This led to an increased interest in oral histories of Partition and owing, in particular, to feminist writers such as Urvashi Butalia (2000, 2002), Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin (1993, 2000), Veena Das (2007) and others, there now exists a rich archive of testimonies gathered from victims/survivors of the event.

That this work becomes necessary signals a prior disavowal or foreclosure of a subjugated other. Further, this foreclosure is an effect of the onto-epistemological conditions of modernity that produce racial and sexual Others as those ‘who can be excluded from (juridical) universality without unleashing an ethical crisis’ (Silva, 2007, pp. xxx-xxxi). The possibility of prior exclusion, then, signifies not merely the condition of historical or social subjugation but rather an ethical subjugation that has rendered these subjects excludable. Consequently, I suggest that the recuperative work that seeks to represent subjugated subjects must include an interrogation of how this onto-epistemec subjugation is perpetuated even within recuperative histories. In other words, it must investigate the rules whereby the subjugated are allowed to emerge within dominant scripts (cf. Spivak, 1988).

This paper examines the onto-epistemec conditions under which the representation of subjugated subjects becomes possible in Partition narratives. Further, it argues that the possibility of representation is contingent upon the reproduction of the subjugated as a signifier of onto-epistemic difference (i.e. an essential(ising) difference structured, for instance, by caste, religion, gender etc.) within a given ethico-political formation (such as community and nation). In order to be a legible and legitimate presence within the history of Partition, then, these subjects must be represented as assimilable within metanarratives(s) of the nation. This form of inclusion lacks the possibility of reparation.

I draw here specifically on Jill Stauffer’s (2015) description of reparation as the process of repairing that which has been destroyed through renewal rather than restoration. This is especially significant in the context of traumatic events wherein the victim/survivor’s sense of self, safety and meaning in the world is unravelled. It is this unravelling, Stauffer notes, that needs repair. This entails restoring authorship to the traumatised subject of, and for, a renewed world – one other than that which inflicted harm. Such reparaiton is not merely of discursive significance: it has material and ethical consequences. Unrepaired experiences of trauma resurface through repetition and thereby perpetuate it. The failure of reparation is starkly evidenced in India, for instance by the recursion of ‘Partition-like’ violence – such as the anti-Sikh pogroms noted above as well as more recent events like the 2002 Godhra riots, the 2020 Delhi riots as well as the contemporary resurgence of Hindu chauvinism in general.

Although these events are generally imagined in communal terms, violence against women has been integral to each. This, of course, is an effect of the woman’s body as the locus of national or ethnic ‘purity’ (cf. Daiya, 2008, Dasgupta, 2011) In the case of Partition, specifically, these battles unfold through two figures – that of the martyred woman and the abducted or ‘disappeared’ woman. The former describes, indeed valorises, women ‘sacrificed’ – through killing or suicide – to preserve the honour of family and faith against the indignity of rape by communal others. The latter names those kidnapped by communal others and who either became objects of rescue for the Indian state or were disappeared from private and public memory.
This paper focuses on the representation of these two figures as they circulate in Partition narratives. I contend here that martyrdom and disappearance constitute a discursive duality that calls attention to the conditions of possibility for the representation of women in general. In fact, as I will argue, these discourses underscore not the inclusion but instead the *excludability* of women therein. In other words, they demonstrate the ongoing onto-epistemic subjugation of the figure of the woman to, and in, the unfolding of the nation.

My argument proceeds through an engagement with two discursive sites: the first is the testimony of a Sikh survivor of Partition named Bir Bahadur Singh. I choose his testimony because much of Bir Bahadur’s story tells of the events that unfolded in Thoa Khalsa, a majority Sikh village in the Rawalpindi district, now in Pakistan. This is of particular importance since, within narrative histories of Partition, Thoa Khalsa is known as the site of mass suicides – or martyrdom – of Sikh women. Moreover, Bir Bahadur’s testimony recalls not only the fate of these martyred women – and his sister, in particular – but also the loss of relationships with male Muslim neighbours and friends. His testimony therefore facilitates a critical insight into how onto-epistemic differences structure the inclusion and exclusion of women’s experiences of Partition. Here, I will demonstrate that, even in those moments wherein women (are made to) appear, this appearance is possible only through a reinscription of subjection. This critique is intended not as a dismissal of the political imperative to ‘include’ subjugated subjects within historico-political narratives, but rather, marks the limits of inclusion, to push at and, perhaps, through them.

My second site of analysis is the Pakistani film *Khamosh Pani*. The film is a fictional account of a Sikh woman abducted from the Indian side of Punjab and taken to the Pakistani side. The story told is primarily of her daily life as a Muslim woman and single mother living in a village Pakistan; her abduction a haunting presence in her life, as in the film. I juxtapose this film with Bir Bahadur Singh’s testimony not only because it considers abduction – as the shadow-side of martyrdom – but because it offers an alternate mode of representation wherein the female subject insists on speaking her (onto-epistemic) subjugation. This mode of representation, I propose threatens the onto-epistemic order that structures Partition history, including its counter-histories, and thus offers greater reparative potential.

Before proceeding with these analyses, I present below a brief overview of the contestations and conflicts within Partition history.

**Narrating Partition**

The responsibility of partitioning India was assigned by the British powers to Sir Cyril Radcliff, an English lawyer who had never traveled east of Paris but was known as a man ‘of great legal abilities, right personality and wider administrative experience’ (quoted in Butalia, 2000, p. 65). His task was seemingly simple: to draw a line. This was to be accomplished with inadequate time, using maps coupled with old census statistics, and with no hands-on knowledge about the land or its people. The line would divide land and so with it private resources, jobs, livelihoods, family, friends, communities: ‘hearts and minds’.

Radcliff’s divisions produced their own Partitions – a million dead; 12 million ‘swapped’ across a constantly shifting border; 75,000 women raped, over 25,000 kidnapped or ‘disappeared.’ And from the backdrop woven together by these moments of Partition arose the banal legacy of Independence. The one last act of the colonial masters; its violence appropriated by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, murdering each other, and their own; of rape and mutilation, burning and pillaging, of ‘ghost trains’ and bloody rivers; images of the ‘damned [located] in the middle of madness and crime’ (Bhalla, 2004, p. 28) – these moments constitute not only some of the many
moments of Partition but also the scene of Independence, of the birth of the nation-state(s), indeed of the nation(s).

Official histories thus establish Partition as a political signifier. They tend to be concerned with describing why it came to be and in detailing its consequences in the institution of the nation-state (cf. Sarkar, 1983, Ludden, 2002). In the Indian context, Partition is viewed as an unfortunate but inevitable outcome of ‘communalism’ in India – of ‘internal conflict and sectarian strife’ (Pandey, 2001, p. 48), sown by the ‘divide and rule practices of the British regime and perpetuated within social and political relations that structured the independence movement. In particular, it is attributed the demand for an independent Muslim-majority ‘Pakistan’ as advanced by the Muslim League.\(^2\) In this writing, Partition history is constructed through an account of the deeply divisive official and public discourse around the notion of Pakistan.\(^3\) This divisiveness affected not only Hindu-Muslim relations. Indeed, Partition histories address how the prospect of an independent Pakistan intensified political antagonisms across various communal lines. For instance, Sikh and Dalit communities – having themselves struggled for political autonomy under British colonial rule – now found their political demands subjugated in negotiations about the new configurations of nation-states. Furthermore, the institution of Pakistan as a Muslim nation-state and of India as a de-facto (Brahmin) Hindu state, heightened anger and fear amongst these communities who rightly perceived their political precarity within either state.

Despite acknowledging this communal character, official histories of Partition view communalism itself as ‘the Other of nationalism, its opposite, its chief adversary’ (Pandey, 2001, p. 3). They thus seek to discount the violence and chaos of Partition as an aberration and to recuperate communalism, instead, into ‘a narrative of assured advance towards specified (or specifiable) resolutions’ (Pandey, 2001, p. 5). Communalism, then, comes to be represented as part of the process of ‘nationalising the nation’ – i.e. the process that facilitated the emergence of the Indian nation and produced new national subjectivities in its wake. This is accomplished, for instance, through providing an account of various constitutional, parliamentary and public negotiations that transformed communalist understandings of nationhood and citizenship\(^4\) into secular pluralist ones intended to define a modern India.

Within this context, women become sites through which the nascent state secures the social and sexual contract. While historical accounts do address violence against women, their focus remains on providing an account of the state’s response to specific forms of violence – i.e. rape

\(^2\) The All-India Muslim League was a political party established in 1906 and was a prominent actor, alongside the Indian National Congress, in the anti-colonial nationalist movement. The party emerged in response to certain segments of the anti-colonial movement that viewed the Mughal Empire as a precursor to British colonialism, and hence viewed national liberation as freedom not only from British but also Muslim rule. However, the notion ‘Pakistan’ emerged prominently and became a central aspect of the party’s platform only in the 1940s (cf. Chatterjee, 1993).

\(^3\) It is important to note that the articulation of Muslims and Hindus as distinct ‘nations’ prevailed in certain quarters of the independence movement right from at least the beginning of the 20th century. Indeed, while this is less discussed in Indian historiography, groups such as the Hindu Mahasabha (a Hindu nationalist organisation), had also been making demands for a separate and independent Hindustan.

\(^4\) This played out, for instance, through an opposition posited between the “natural nation” – comprised of Hindus and other minorities likes Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists who were viewed as belonging to religions ‘born’ in India – and those deemed “non-natural” – e.g. Muslims and Christians who were viewed as belonging to religions introduced to India through conquest and colonialism (cf. Pandey, 2001).
and abduction. In publicly recriminating and organizing an official response\(^5\) to these forms of violence, the state was able to institute itself as ‘parent-protector’ and to domesticate the (male) citizen subject, charging him with the responsibility of securing the heteropatriarchal family as the fundamental unit of nationhood. Unheeded in these accounts are the women ‘sacrificed’ or ‘martyred’ in order to preserve communal or national purity.

This approach to the history of women in Partition follows the tendency noted above of taming violence and chaos into a ‘narrative of assured advance towards specified... resolutions’ – i.e. that of constructing a modern nation. As such, these histories aspire to establish the historical ‘truth’ of Partition – an objective reality ‘outside of merely competing subjectivities’ (Berlatsky, 2011, p. 2). The imperative for constructing an objective history, as Berlatsky notes, takes on added significance in circumstances wherein the present must be articulated as distinct and a departure from the past – as was necessary for the Indian nation-state in instituting itself as an entity moving past its colonial and communal past into an independent and secular pluralist present.

Yet such accounts remain interpretations of events that seek ‘to establish and circumscribe the rules of society in the name of objective representation’ (Berlatsky, 2011, p. 12). As such, official history is as much a narrative – a story told by an ‘author who has selected the material from a potentially infinite morass of real or imagined alternatives’ (2011, p. 14) – as oral history – stories told in private, built from a recollection of personal memories. It therefore becomes necessary to not only examine the ideological implications underlying official histories but also expand upon and complicate these – i.e. to tell more and different stories. This is the impetus, no doubt, of recuperative projects – to destabilise the official signification of Partition by including stories that are missed or missing.

The productivity of survivor testimony lies in its capacity to disrupt ideas of historical ‘truth’; to re-direct it away from grand politics and towards the ordinary. Within the context of traumatic events, this disruptive possibility is an effect of not merely the content of testimony but also the form that structures its telling. Traumatic memory is in fact non-memory wherein ‘the subject is often incapable of making the necessary narrative which we call memory regarding the event’ (Janet quoted in Kabir, 2005 p. 182). Trauma refuses its place in a neat historical timeline, ‘in history as done and finished with’ (Edkins, 2003, p. 59) and insists instead on ‘encircling’ itself. This process of encircling is pivotal in producing what Walter Benjamin (1968) calls a ‘monad’ – a configuration that emerges through the arrest of the smooth flow of thought, producing a crisis of knowledge and suggesting the existence of a different, troubling ‘truth’. It is this monadic structure of testimony that produces the unruliness of survivor accounts.

Even so, oral histories are not necessarily devoid of the same pitfalls as official histories. Despite its encircling, the telling – the repeated speaking – of traumatic events enables survivors to return to the source and make meaning of it. Indeed, ‘engaging in a narration of traumatic memories is an endeavour to try to comprehend the source of these’ (Singh, 2015, p. 185). Moreover, for traumatic (non)memory to emerge as narrative memory ‘the traumatic event itself has to be integrated into a story, which in turn must be addressed to someone’ (Kabir, 2005 p. 182). Thus, both official and oral histories are narrative forms that function by ‘providing mastery over [incomprehensible] events, wrestling them through its mechanisms of causality and conclusion into meaning of some kind’ (Berlatsky, 2011, p. 24). They do so by selecting aspects

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\(^5\) Concerned by the scale of abductions, the Indian and Pakistan governments signed an agreement to recover and return any abducted women and children found on ‘the wrong side’ of the border. This later came to be known as the Central Recovery Operation.
of memory, whether public or private, that lend (a degree of) coherence or meaning to the story and excluding those that are an unresolvable excess – i.e. that resist being subsumed within or integrated into it (cf. Singh, 2015, pp. 186, 192, Mohanram, 2011, p. 929).

The preceding account underscores the essential subjectivity of all historical telling as well as the impossibility of accessing a ‘true’ or ‘real’ account of the past. It may thus be argued that oral histories of Partition do not get us much closer to ‘what really happened’. This does not imply that oral histories do not serve an important function. In fact, as Berlatsky insists, we have a responsibility to understand all facets of past experience in order to present a workable ethics (2001, pp. 36-37). This, indeed, is the impetus of projects that seek to recover subjugated histories.

My concern with the im/possibility of accessing a ‘true’ or ‘real’ past departs from the issue of subjectivity and turns, instead, towards the onto-epistemological. I am interested, that is, in ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ as an onto-epistemological effect – wherein the act of telling is itself contingent upon what has been deemed legitimate.

Consequently, what is at stake in the histories of Partition is not so much the ‘truth’ of the event, but rather what can be said about it, and how. Even to the extent that women are represented, or able to self-represent, the imperative of coherence demands that their narratives remain confined to the context of home, religion and nation – onto-epistemic contexts that resignify them within the proper ethical order.

The Testimony of Bir Bahadur Singh
Bir Bahadur Singh was born and raised in Saintha, a village in the Rawalpindi district, now in Pakistan. His was the only Sikh family in a village of Muslims. In 1945, as talks of Partition began to churn, his father decided to relocate the family to Thoa Khalsa, also in Rawalpindi but a majority Sikh village. In March 1947, following incidents of anti-Muslim violence, the village, despite attempted negotiation, came under heavy Muslim attack. Bir Bahadur’s father along with other village elders then undertook of martyr the women and children:

In Gulab Singh's haveli, twenty-six girls had been put aside. First of all my father, Sant Raja Singh, when he brought his daughter, he brought her into the courtyard to kill her; first of all he prayed, he did ardaas, saying sachche padshah, we have not allowed your sikhi to get stained, and in order to save it we are going to sacrifice our daughters, make them martyrs. Please forgive us.

He killed two [men who asked to be killed] and the third was my sister, Maan Kaur ... My sister came and sat in front of my father and I stood there, right next to him, clinging on to his kurta, as children do. I was clinging to him ... but when my father swung the kirpan, perhaps some doubt or fear came into his mind, or perhaps the kirpan got stuck in her dupatta ... no one can say. It was such a frightening, such a fearful scene. Then my sister, with her own hand, she removed her plait and pulled it forward ... and my father with his own hands moved her dupatta aside and then he swung the kirpan and her head rolled off and fell ... far away. I crept downstairs, weeping, sobbing, and all the while I could hear the regular swing and hit of kirpans. (quoted in Butalia, 2002, p. 149)

The deaths did not cease here. Soon after, the young Bir Bahadur witnessed the suicide of Mata Lajjawanti and ninety other nameless women who followed her to their deaths:
I was sitting with my mother, this incident of the twenty-five women [the beheading] had taken place… so sitting at the well, Mata Lajjawanti, who was also called Sardarni Gulab Kaur, she said two words, she jumped into the well and some eighty women followed her… they also jumped in. The well filled up completely; one woman whose name is Basant Kaur, six children born from her womb died in that well, but she survived. She jumped in four times, but the well had filled up… she would jump in, then come out, then jump in again… she would look at her children, at herself… till today, she is alive. (quoted in Butalia, 2000, p. 164)

Incidents such as those recounted by Bir Bahadur are not isolated moments in Partition narratives, nor are they muted. Instead, as indicated earlier, they are often valorised as acts of martyrdom. But, as Butalia wonders, can this assumption of martyrdom really be so? Maan Kaur, for instance, was only sixteen at the time of Partition. To what extent did this young woman fathom the politics of Partition? How did she understand her ‘martyrdom’ (2000, p. 160)?

Questions such as these are necessary, no doubt, to denormalise discourses about the ‘martyred’ woman. As Butalia note, ‘the lines between choice and coercion must have been far more blurred than these accounts reflect’ (2000, p. 168). Yet, the recourse to subjective experience prevents an interrogation of how the figure of the woman is always already instituted within modern ethico-political formations – such as nation and community – as a subjugated subject. Regardless of how the imperative ‘martyrdom’ is felt or understood this discourse, I suggest, is a condition of possibility for the emergence of women, specifically Sikh women, as legible subjects of Partition. Except for this discourse, the killing of these women by fathers and brothers, would remain ethically and politically incomprehensible and, hence, excluded/excludable from historical telling.

Discourse, according to Michel Foucault, is a social system that produces knowledge and meaning. This system is organised through a ‘body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in time and space that have defined a given period’ (1972, p. 117). These rules guide not only what can be said – i.e. what can be instituted as an object of discourse and what it can be made to convey – but also determine the ordering of objects of discourse – i.e. how these objects relate to one another in producing socially comprehensible statements (1972, p. 49). The aim of discourse analysis, then, is to define these objects ‘by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance’ (1972, p. 48).

Within Bir Bahadur’s testimony above emerge two distinct objects of discourse – women and martyrdom. These objects appear against the historical backdrop of Partition and, thus, religion and nation. To understand the conditions of possibility for the emergence of woman and martyr, then, they must be examined in relation to both, their own onto-epistemic constitution as well as in relation to religion (Sikhism) and nation (India) as the conditions of their historical appearance.

In her critique of the play between the social contract and the sexual contract as the foundation of modern society, Carol Pateman (1988) asserts that while the ‘original’ contract is in fact a socio-sexual contract, the sexual dimensions of which have merely been disappeared from sociopolitical consciousness. Of course, the ‘sexual contract’ is a misnomer because the precondition for a being to be party to a contract is that one be an ‘individual’ – i.e. that, in the state of nature, they be born free and equal to others. Women can never satisfy this pre-condition because they are ontologically produced in affectability.⁶ The ontological lack of woman makes it

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⁶ The affectable being is the ethico-political other, a subject instituted through exterior determination, whose body and mind are both affected by a reason that belongs to the realm of nature. The affectable being is, thus, not a thing
impossible for her to be party to the contract. Women are, thus, always already barred from political subjectivity.

This articulation of ‘woman’ as outside the political structured social and political relations within colonial, pre-Partition India. For instance, the figure of the Hindu Indian woman, in particular, was a pre-eminent site of encounter for colonial domination and resistance. For instance, the British enacted domination through the project of ‘saving brown women from brown men’ (Spivak, 1988, p. 296), manifest primarily through laws governing gender and sexuality – e.g. those concerning widow remarriage, age of consent and minimum age of marriage for women, and, of course, the practice of sati. For Hindu Indian men, these laws represented their lack of political agency, so that reclaiming control over women’s bodies became a crucial element of the anti-colonial politics (cf. Mohanram, 2011, p. 924).

The sense of powerlessness with respect to the regulation of women’s sexuality was exacerbated by the situation of economic and social domination – represented, for example, by the prevalence of foreign commodities and the imposition of ‘modern’ education. Nationalist politics therefore also demanded the management of familial relations against ‘western modernity’ through a return to ‘spirituality and inner power, tradition and true Indianness’ (Mohanram, 2011, p. 924), all of which were signified by the practices and rituals of women. Within male nationalist discourse, then, ‘women’… was an empty signifier tethered to social and political contingencies [and] ‘tradition’ the catch-all term for things pre-colonial… [both of which] represented to the native a discursive space over which colonial control was not to be endured’ (Mookerjea-Leonard quoted in Mohanram, 2011, p. 925).

Separate from Hindu anti-colonial politics, for Sikhs, the figure of the woman was mobilised to articulate not only an anti-colonial, nationalist identity but also one that was distinct from Hindu Indianness. Sikh identity was grounded in their description as a martial race, in opposition to an effeminacy ascribed to Hindus (cf. Mandair, 2006). Central to this imagination is the ‘martyr’ – a venerated figure, ‘an unambiguous exemplar of virtue, truth and moral justification’ who gives his life in upholding righteousness… under the most painful and chilling circumstances…, providing testimony to their faith with their blood’ (Fenech, 1997, p. 625). While martyrs, themselves, may be men and women, the imperative of martyrdom is posited as a testament to the masculinity of Sikhs.

Sikh onto-epistemology also imagined the nation7 as masculine – as opposed to the feminine nation of Hindus – and hence belonging within nation was understood through being ‘the deserving sons of a valiant father’8 (Das, 1998, p. 111). Accordingly, Sikh community was posited as a community of men (and further, as a community of sons descended from the father in whose ancestry all signs of the mother have been obliterated’ (Das, 1998, p. 113). Moreover, Sikhs viewed not only the British colonisers but also the dominant Hindus as an existential threat to their identity and nation. This threat was perceived in terms of a feminisation of the community – through subordination and osmosis, respectively – and hence political resistance demanded a negation of the feminine.

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7 Nation here refers to the singular community that Sikhs saw themselves as belonging to. For a more detailed discussion see Axel, 2001.

8 The ‘valiant father’, here, refers to the Gurus, i.e. the acknowledged founders of the Sikh religion, from who the Sikh nation is descended.
Within this context, the figure of the Sikh woman was instituted as one who performed seva, or selfless service, to the nation not only through a devotion to domestic duties within and beyond the household, but also by demonstrating a willingness to perform the traditionally masculine service of fighting for the valiant father (cf. Murphy, 2009, pp. 165-166). This imperative of devotion to the father was necessitated by the imperative to establish a pure, uncontaminated Sikh ancestry (Das, 1998, p. 111). Sikhs, whose religion descended and departed from Hinduism, needed to secure their authenticity and distinction, in order to legitimise their claim to nationhood. This required women, as bearers of the nation, to preserve their own ‘purity’ as an act of selfless service.

Within Bir Bahadur’s testimony, ‘woman’, one the one hand, and Partition (as political signifier), on the other, occupy what Foucault calls ‘points of incompatibility’, wherein ‘two objects… may appear, in the same discursive formation, without being able to enter – under the pain of manifest contradiction or inconsequence – the same series of statements’ (1972, p. 65). That is, given the ontological impossibility of ‘woman’ in signifying the political, these objects of discourse cannot appear as elements that constitute Partition as signifying object. In order to appear as a constitutive element of Partition, then, ‘woman’ must occupy a ‘point of equivalence’ with the latter. Two incompatible elements occupy points of equivalence when they ‘are formed in the same way and on the basis of the same rules; the conditions of their appearance are identical; they are situated at the same level; and instead of constituting a mere defect of coherence, they form an alternative’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 65). In Bir Bahadur’s testimony, these requisite ‘identical conditions’ are afforded through the intervention of the discourse ‘martyrdom’.

As noted above, the Sikh martyr appears as an object of discourse in relation to the discursive formations of nation and community. Nation, instituted through ‘foundational fictions’ (such as race, religion, etc.), is ‘as much acts of affiliation and establishment as they are moments of disavowal, displacement, exclusion, and cultural contestation’ (Bhabha, 1990, p. 5). In the case of Partition, this unfolds through people getting pushed out, or pulled in, towards ‘a more “fitting home”’ (George, 2007, p. 140). It is similarly evidenced in the managing of boundaries between the nation, as a ‘natural’ community, and its others. Partition violence is explained, even authorised, as the actualisation of a moral duty to preserve the nation and thereby secure ethico-political order.

The figure of the woman, or the feminine figure – as demonstrated above – always already poses a threat to this order and is, as such, negatable. The discourse of martyrdom allows this negation – i.e. the killing – of women to be ‘[wrestled] through its mechanisms of causality and conclusion into meaning of some kind’ (Berlatsky, 2011, p. 24). Unlike the raped or abducted woman who rarely enters Partition narratives, the martyred woman enables a telling of destruction and death that coheres to rules that authorise women/femininity as subordinated to men/masculinity. Indeed, the preservation of Sikh (masculinist) ethico-political order, is evidenced not only in the actions of men who sought to ‘secure’ women from the communal/national other but also in the willingness of women to sacrifice themselves for the same. Consequently, as Butalia notes, these acts of killing and suicide are never narrated as violence (2000, p. 169).

Ninety women died by mass suicide in Thoa Khalsa; tens more were killed – and some survived:

Mostly our family women died, and then the ones who jumped in the well. But the others were saved. Because the Musalmaans saw that they were killing themselves. The ones who sacrificed… if the women of our family had not been killed, and those who jumped in the well
had not taken their own lives, the ones who were left alive would not have been alive today.

(Bir Bahadur Singh in Butalia, 2000, p. 166)

The martyrdom of the dead women of Thoa Khalsa secured the honour of those who lived. In safeguarding them against rape and abduction – a fate viewed as equivalent to death – they enabled these women to live. One of the women still living was Basant Kaur – the woman named earlier who lost six children to the well but could not drown herself because it was already swollen with bodies. Basant Kaur, Bir Bahadur later reveals to Butalia, is his own mother. Yet, her story is far less prominent in his story than those of Maan Kaur and the other martyred women. ‘Much easier,’ Butalia remarks, ‘to speak of the sister who died an “honourable death”, than the mother who survived’ (2000, p. 168)

The prevalence of the figure of the martyred woman in Partition narratives, then, does not necessarily mark the political agency of women but is the condition of possibility for ‘woman’ to occupy points of equivalence with ‘Partition’ as an object of discourse. Moreover, the discourse of martyrdom keeps the figure of the woman onto-epistemically tethered to the heteropatriarchal formations of ‘nation’ and ‘religion’ – posing, therefore, no threat to the established ethical order. This, of course, does not imply a futility of such telling these stories. But what it does mark is the inadequacy of available language in producing these as political – or, in other words, of making Partition unnarratable without them. The inclusion of women – specifically their ‘martyrdom’ – institutes them as just another object of Partition discourse. Their stories cannot alter, or indeed reassert, the political signification of the event already otherwise established.

There is in Bir Bahadur’s testimony a profound silence around any sense of grief or contrition for Maan Kaur’s death. This is not to suggest that these emotions are unfelt but rather that they remain untellable. Bir Bahadur narrates these sentiments, instead, in relation to his former Muslim neighbours.

In 2000, Urvashi Butalia travelled with Bir Bahadur Singh back to his native village, Saintha, now across the border in Pakistan. Bir Bahadur describes the motive for this journey as a desire to make-up with his former Muslim neighbours and to ask their forgiveness for the events that unfolded between them during Partition. In moving from their home in Saintha to Thoa Khalsa. Bir Bahadur’s family had refused offers of protection from their Muslim neighbours, turning friends into the enemy. Further, Bir Bahadur wishes to secure forgiveness through the gesture of sharing of food and water: ‘There are two things I want to do if we make it to Saintha…. To drink water from the village well and to eat in the home of a Mussalman’ (Butalia, 2002, p. 154). For Bir Bahadur, these were actions of penitence and reconciliation for the treatment of Muslims prior to Partition.

Bir Bahadur describes how social relations between Sikhs and Muslims were structured through rituals of purity and pollution:

If there was any function that we had, then we used to call Mussalmans to our homes; they would eat in our houses, but we would not eat in theirs, and this is a bad thing, which I realize now. If they would come to our houses we would have two utensils in one corner of the house, and we would tell them, pick these up and eat in them; they would then wash and keep them aside, and this was such a terrible thing. This was the reason Pakistan was created. (Butalia, 2002, pp. 149-150)

The equivocal relation of mutual affection expressed above is underpinned by a fear of contamination. This may be understood as an effect of the notions of the sacred and profane
that underlie religious belief. This is the sentiment, too, that ultimately took the life of Maan Kaur and the other numerous-nameless women ‘martyred’ in Partition. But even as this unjust treatment of Muslims can be repented and amended, the figure of the woman stagnates as ‘martyr’.

One possible intervention here is to ask who can be repented, and how? For instance, while Bir Bahadur displays a sense of contrition towards his Muslim friends, he also expresses compassion for his father – “imagine, a father who kills his daughter, how much of a victim, how helpless he must be” (quoted in Butalia, 2002, p. 160) – and a sense of admiration for Maan Kaur who had brought honour upon the family. Reading these sentiments as (an effect of) Sikh onto-epistemology outlined above, we might suggest that Bir Bahadur’s compassion is directed towards the actualisation of his father qua Father, whereas the admiration for his sister is limited to her service as woman.

Bir Bahadur’s compassion towards his father marks his understanding of, and identification with, the role of the valiant father in preserving the Sikh nation. As such, his father is his exemplar – ‘the duplicate, the reproduction, the copy as well as the original, the type, the model … projected or recognized in the true friend, [as] his ideal double, his other self, the same as self but improved’ (Derrida, 1997, p. 4). His Muslim neighbors, on the other hand, once posited as an identifiable enemy (1997, p. 83), are now transformed into friends – a friendship founded on the sentiment of fraternal love; a love that transcends moments of enmity (ibid.). But neither of these positions is available to Maan Kaur.

The enemy, as the signifier and holder of political order, is necessarily male. The figure of the friend, similarly, ‘seems spontaneously to belong to a familial, fraternalist and thus androcentric configuration of politics’ (Derrida, 1997, p. viii; emphasis in original). Consequently, there exists no (representational) possibility of ‘friendship’ between men and women, or women and women (see also Gandhi, 2006, pp. 26-29). Thus, while the figure of the father and the Muslim other may appear under the sign of ‘friend’, ‘woman’ and ‘friend’ are points of incompatibility and hence cannot emerge in the same series of statements in Partition discourse. In fact, not only is Maan Kaur absent from Bir Bahadur Singh’s speech, but even when asked about her by those who do not know of her death, he does not respond. Those who perhaps were aware of her death, notes Butalia, spoke of her as if she was still alive (Butalia, 2002, p. 152).

Ahead of his travels to Saintha, Bir Bahadur had written a few letters to his erstwhile neighbours, informing them of this arrival. In one he wrote:

I have come to Pakistan from India to fulfill a long-cherished dream. All my life I have had but one dream - that is, to be able to come here and meet with all of you, and now I have come to realize this dream. I wanted to come back, to visit again the places where I played as a child, to meet with all of those people who gave me so much love; I knew that if I could do this, it would give me real happiness. I have forgotten the names of so many of you who were my childhood friends. Those of our elders who are alive, please give my salutations to them, and those who have passed on, I ask you to pay my respects at their graves. For those of you who are alive, I hope you will accept once again the hand of true friendship that I extend to you. (Butalia, 2002, pp. 157-158)

Having visited Saintha, Bir Bahadur was unable not continue his journey onto Thoa. The village now lay beyond the areas of Pakistan accessible to Indians. His friends in Sainthta warned too against travel there due to the ‘unfriendliness’ of the villagers. Thoa, once a majority Sikh village
was now all Muslim – Muslims who, no doubt, carried their own traumas of Partition. And so, Maan Kaur remained in the spaces of silence in Bir Bahadur’s return.

While a friend may be mourned and an enemy repented, a sister must remain martyred. To mourn or repent her death is to reject (the work of) the ethico-political order. It is only in the valorisation of her death as martyrdom that she can occupy her proper objectified space within this order. Yet, in the context of the return – of the restoration of friendship – Maan Kaur cannot be thus recuperated. In fact, her ‘martyrdom’ threatens the very grounds of this renewal – she died because her family did not accept the shelter of their Muslim neighbours; she died because they became an enemy; she died to ‘protect the honour’ of her family and her faith from this enemy.

The alternation of silence and valorisation of Maan Kaur’s death, as of many other women who died like her, marks the ontological limits of the figure of the woman in effecting political signification. In other words, the representation of the figure of the woman in Partition narratives remains contingent upon the established onto-epistemic order thereby preserving coherence within the ‘madness’ of the event. In what follows I offer an alternate account of representation – one that transgresses the established order – through an engagement with the figure of the abducted woman.

_Khamosh Pani_

_Khamosh Pani_ introduces us to Ayesha, a single mother living with her teenage son in a small village in Pakistan. The film develops a portrait of Ayesha’s relationships of mutual love and recognition with her son – her only apparent kin – as well as with other villagers. The film moves through her house and her village, spatiotemporally depicting her intimate subjectivity through, for instance, pictures and memories of her deceased husband, and the continuum of her interactions at the village market. The contingency of Ayesha’s seemingly stable, un-ruptured existence, however, is revealed through the spectre of the village well.

The audience is initially informed that Ayesha refuses to draw her own water from the well, preferring instead to have her neighbour deliver it to her house each day. This detail, offered only in passing, forebodes the reality of Ayesha’s existence. This foreboding is later intensified through montages of memories – first, of young feet and laughing voices playing around a well. The narrative thread of these memories is developed in conjunction with the changing realities in Ayesha’s exterior life – with her son being swept up in a nationalist move towards extremist Islamic ideology, and the arrival of a group of Sikh pilgrims to her village.

The arrival of the Sikh men, one of whom is searching for his lost sister, provides the backdrop for the deterioration of her relationship with her son, Saleem, who begins to question his mother’s Muslim-ness, as well as the breaking off of ties between Ayesha and her closest friend, Shabbo. The playing, laughing feet around the well are now transformed into screaming, escaping ones. The Sikh man looking for his lost sister is indeed Ayesha’s brother – Ayesha who once, before Partition, was Veero. The terrified feet in Ayesha’s memory, are Veero’s, escaping her father’s demands for martyrdom at the site of the village well. Her son is the one she bore with her abductor. Her deceased husband is that abductor.

I have earlier in this paper referred to Partition as a traumatic event. Trauma is an embodied and/or psychic experience inaugurated by pain. Etymologically, it is linked to the former; psychoanalytically, to the latter. The experience of violence during Partition entails, no doubt, both aspects of trauma. This is especially true in the case of women who were raped and abducted. Further, traumatic events effect ‘a complete objectification of the subject-as-agent, with a complete annihilation of her sense of coherency and control over her life and body, and the victim being made to feel utterly helpless’ (Mohanram, 2011, p. 918). This, as noted earlier, results in an
unraveling of one’s sense of self in the world. To be able to live again in this world, the traumatized subject needs to access a new understanding of her body and her identity. Yet, the possibility of such reparation is unavailable to women in Partition so long as their restoration is ‘always tethering them to nationalistic discourses [making them] function only as metaphors of the nation’ (Mohanram, 2011, p. 931). This recapitulates my argument in the previous section.

Beyond this individual experience, Partition also represents a moment of cultural trauma – i.e. trauma that ‘damages the “tissues of a community,” but [also] “is linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory”’ (Eyerman and Erikson quoted in Kabir, 2005, p. 180). As is evident, Partition tore through bonds that had woven communities together and demanded new ways of relating to and belonging within them. This latter endeavour operates through the discursive disappearance of the raped and abducted woman (cf. Butalia, 2000, Das, 2007).

Ayesha is the silent resolution of cultural trauma. She lives in her native village, a Muslim woman, wife/widow, mother, in Pakistan – relating and related to as such. The arrival of Veero’s brother, resurfaces not only Veero/Ayesha’s trauma but also that of her community. As Ayesha’s contingent existent approaches its limit, her relationships with her Saleem and Shabbo are cut through with suspicion and fear. Shabbo no longer wishes to be seen with her and refuses to draw water for her from the well.9 Saleem – swept up in a wave Islamic fundamentalism – denounces her.

Saleem: So that’s it. My mother is the sister of an infidel. Why did you hide this all these years? What shall I do?
Ayesha: You needn’t do anything.

Ayesha she is coerced back to the well. Here she encounters her brother returned:

Ayesha/Veero: What do you want after all these years? What do you want?
Brother: Father’s dying. He wants to see you.
Veero: So he can finish the job? Wasn’t killing mother and Jeeto enough?
Brother: He just wants to die in peace.
Ayesha/Veero: He wanted to kill me for his peace. ... You were happy to think I was dead.
But I’m alive. I made my own life without you. (1:22:40)

Yet, the re-surfacing of her brother unearthed the threatening spectre of Veero, destabilising Ayesha’s contingent existence. The suspicion of her son, the loss of her best friend, and the potential mistrust from the rest of the village meant loss loomed before Ayesha/Veero yet again. This time, however, in her final sovereign act, Ayesha invites death to descend upon her, for the silent waters that had so long held her secret to finally engulf her. And so, Ayesha rejoins Veero, as a stark white figure set against a dark night, takes that leap into the well – a leap that had merely been postponed but whose possibility had never been closed.

The line between choice and coercion is no less blurry in Ayesha’s suicide than in that of the (other) martyred women. Besides, simple ascriptions of agency run the danger of valorising actions while masking the conditions of subjugation and coercion that make violent action

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9 It is revealed later in the film that a young woman in Shabbo’s family too (presumably her daughter) had been lost to the ‘other side’.
necessary. Therefore, to the extent that authorship can be read, it must be so that it reveals precisely
the violence of the social order.

With reference to the figure of Antigone, for instance, Butler notes how by not only
committing but, more significantly, in claiming the act (of burying her brother despite the King
Creon’s prohibition), Antigone asserts her sovereignty against that of the Law. Antigone, notes
Butler, comes ‘to act in ways that are called manly not only because she acts in defiance of the law
but also because she assumes the voice of the law in committing the act against the law. She not
only does the deed… but she does it again by refusing to deny that she has done it… He expects
that his word will govern her deeds, and she speaks back to him, countering his sovereign speech
act by asserting her own sovereignty’ (2000, p. 11, emphasis added).

This is precisely the form of action undertaken by Veero. For Veero, the place of the well
represents a subjective denial and death contained
her father’s command to jump. For, here, her
proper name, Veero, is replaced by ‘woman’, a mere ethico-political signifier. In running away,
then, Veero refuses the Law in order to preserve her self – ‘No. Not me. Not me.’ (1:21:34) – not
that of her family or community. Indeed, Ayesha/Veero claims her act – refuses to deny it – in her
confrontation with her brother. She repeats this act – the refusal of her father’s demand – in
refusing to return to him. In fact, she speaks back to him:

What will he do if he sees me alive and a Muslim? How will he go to his Sikh heaven? And
what heaven is there for me? A Sikh heaven or a Muslim heaven?

Yet, soon after this encounter, Ayesha/Veero takes the final jump.

While the women that died by suicide during Partition can be narrated as having performed
a service to their faith – their acts mimicking the sons of valiant fathers – there is no place in place
here for Ayesha/Veero’s death. That her death is an effect of patriarchal violence – not of
patriarchal sacrifice – is irrefutable. Yet, her death, especially in its postponement, is also, and
emphatically, a refusal of being subject to, and subjected by, it. Her act of suicide – a direct
consequence of her brother’s negation and her son’s disavowal – demands attention to her
subjugation, refusing its erasure. Such a reading disallows the use of the term ‘martyr’ as well as
refuses the mediation of ‘family’, ‘community’ or ‘nation’. It is an act focused on the self – that
for which life itself becomes sacrificed. It is violence of the ethico-political order met with
sovereign violence of the self – a political act par excellence.

Re-presentation

The work of representation (i.e. of speech and signification) as Gayatri Spivak (1999)
notes, is caught between the double-bind of recovery and loss, for the work of accessing an other
necessarily entails closures of their own truth. Undertaking the work of representation is to
acknowledge this double-bind and to attend to “the anguish… that a fully just world is impossible,
forever deferred and different from our projections, the undecidable in the face of which risk the
decision that we can hear the other” (1999, p. 199). This implies that we cannot recuse ourselves
from a responsibility towards the other.

To face the anguish, we must, instead, open ourselves to the other, be responsible to their
voice, to read or hear this voice reparatively. This requires ‘open[ing] yourself to surprise, to the
sometimes unwelcome sense that you do not already have at hand the tools you need for hearing
and responding’ (Stauffer, 2015, p. 69, emphasis added). To do so is to allow the subjects of trauma
authorship of a repaired world. Absent it, we risk enabling the subjects of normative reality to represent themselves out of the onto-epistemic program of subjugation (Spivak, 1988).

The preceding reading of Ayesha/Veero, I propose, is reparative. At least, it disallows the male subject to absent themselves from the enactment of violence or to remove themselves from the operation of subjugation. Maan Kaur’s death, however, does not sit as comfortably within such readings. That Partition narratives make (some) space for the latter, while disappearing the former marks a slippage in the inclusion, or includability, of women in history. This underscores the political necessity of the telling different stories: more ‘surprising’ stories that unravel material and symbolic attachments to the given onto-epistemic order.

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