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The Body of the Condemned: Examining Gender Violence during the Partition in Manto's Works by Rudrani Gangpadhyay

The Partition of India is without doubt one of the most violent incidents in history. Within that history, however, there lies another one - that of atrocious brutalities suffered by the women during the Partition, which is a history as violent as the ripping apart of nation itself. There is no easy way to make sense of this violence, if at all there is one. One can only look at history to see how rape has perennially been used as an instrument of war: the idea being that inflicting damage on the women of the enemy would inflict the same on the enemy's honour. To see examples of that, one need only look as far as our Epics. The Partition was no different. The body of the women became the vessel for one side's honour, and the instrument of the destruction of said honour for the other side.

While often the literature of the Partition arrives at the violence inflicted on the body of the nation or of the people indirectly, one needs to remember that this is perhaps some form of coping mechanism, because the experience is too difficult to recollect in one's writing directly. However, the actual physicality is also there, as it is unavoidable if one were to re-live the trauma of the time. Of all the writers who have written about the Partition, Saadat Hasan Manto perhaps stands out in what Ishtiaq Ahmed describes as his proverbial "indicment of the senseless partition violence"[1]. Indeed Manto's depiction is at the same time acutely potent and sensitive, dwelling upon the horrors of Parition but with a stroke of genius and often, dark humour, that leaves only the bitter recognition of human failure at its wake. Sudha Tiwari, in her *Economic and Political Weekly* article "Memories of partition: Revisiting Saadat Hasan Manto", writes about Manto's mastery as such:

> *"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"[2].*

In particular, Manto's treatment of female characters renders the pain and trauma suffered by women during the Partition especially poignant. Pakistani columnist Rumi Raza is not far from the truth when he writes that "the construction and treatment of

[1] Ishtiaq Ahmed. "Saadat Hassan Manto and the Partiton of India". Daily Times, Sunday, January 20, 2012 <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2012\01\22\story_22-1-2012_pg3_3>

[2] Sudha Tiwari. "Memories of Partition: Revising Saadat hasan Manto". Economic and Political Weekly. Volune XLVIII, No. 25. June 22, 2013. <http://www.epw.in/system/files/pdf/2013_48/25/Memories_of_Partition.pdf?ip_login_no_cache=925e8d58e2295f982601136362153c11>

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female characters by Manto turns them into complex, and sometimes ambiguous metaphors of humanity"[3].

While looking at Manto's works and indeed most Partition narratives, it becomes very important thus to focus on the body, be that of the nation or the individual. In a sense, the two are so integrally co-related in this case the line often blurs between them and one becomes the signifier or the microcosm of the other. Michel Foucault, in his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History"[4]4, discusses how the body manifests as a stigmata of past experiences and becomes an inscribed surface of events. With respect to the history of 1947, its aftermath, as well as its depiction in literature, Foucault's commentary would indicate that the mechanism of state and gender hierarchies became operational by becoming inscribed on the bodies of the state-operated individuals, particularly that of women.

Historian Veena Das writes that there were at least a 100,000 abductions of women in this period from Punjab alone, of which only 10% were later found[5]. As the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities were helplessly dislocated, rape and violation of the women of the 'Other' communities became the most common expression of rage to exact what they thought was communal vengeance. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, in their seminal work *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, describe the full extent of the violence:

> *"The range of sexual violation [-] ... stripping; parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding the breasts and genitalia with triumphal slogans; amputating breasts; knifing open the womb; raping, of course; killing foetuses – is shocking not only for its savagery, but for what it tells us about women as objects in male construction of their own honour. Women's sexuality symbolizes 'manhood', its description is a matter of such shame and dishonour it has to be avenged"[6].*

The description of violence is not only shocking, but reveals something about the motivation behind it as well. The patriarchal discourse, it would appear, haunted the course of events during the Partition.

The violence on women was not simply restricted to physical and consequent emotional trauma. There were, in fact, several layers to this violence: there was the obvious and most blatant communal violence experienced by women and exacted by the men of other communities; there was familial violence as family members either killed the women in their families themselves or encouraged them to commit suicide so that the family's honour – in the form of the women's sexuality – could be sustained; and there

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[3] Rumi Raza. "Manto's Women". The Friday Times. February 13, 2015. <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/mantos-women/>
[4] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History". Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139-164.
[5] Veena Das. Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 59 -61.
[6] 6 Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin. Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 43.

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was the violence associated with the rehabilitation of the abducted women – as governments forcibly took women away from the families they had settled with, by choice or by force, post-Partition, and made them leave behind children born to them from these 'wrong' alliances. If a pregnant woman was being rehabilitated, then the government sponsored abortions, whether or not the woman wanted it. Mitchell J. Wood writes about how

> *"The feminist movement waged legal battles and cultural wars that are specifically body centered, focusing on the right of women to control their bodies in such areas as abortion, rape, domestic violence, and media imagery"*[7].

Urvashi Butalia, in the essay "Community, State and Gender: Some Reflections on the Partition of India", talks about other, "less obvious traumas: for many, particularly middle-class women, the dislocation meant that the option of marriage, supposedly a part of 'normal' everyday society, was closed off ... Others were widowed, lost their homes and possessions..."[8]. The violence permeated even deeper, within their bodies as well as within the social body.

The acts of violence often took place like a spectacle. The men of the women's family or community were made to watch as she was brutalized, often by multiple aggressors. These men signed names on the women's body parts, or left religious slogans carved into their victims' bodies. For the women – if they were alive at all – there was post-traumatic stress to cope with as well as the process of learning to live with violent memories as well as violently unwelcome criticism from a society ill-equipped to deal with the trauma that these women suffered. The latter is perhaps responsible for the amount of silence that surrounds the realm of women's narratives about the partition. Surviving victims themselves rarely speak or have spoken about the atrocities they underwent for fear of social ostracizing, victimizers too kept their silence.

Nationalism as well as communalism were both significant ideologies at work during the Partition. Interestingly, both of these concepts have women at their heart. India as a nation was seen and eulogized as a Mother and young men were raised to fight and sacrifice themselves in the name of the Motherland. However, even the domain the Motherland was one controlled by men. Women's reproductive domain was, in a sense, abstracted, even fetishised. Since the spiritual domain was a weapon in the hands of the nationalist, the glorification of motherhood was the double-refined spirituality that was used as a major mode of representation for the nationalists. Rubina Saigol points out how gendered the creation of such war mind-set is:

> *"it is not only young men who are conditioned to be the defenders of the faith, the motherland and nation; women are similarly conditioned to believe that they need defending by strong male protectors and that, as mothers, they must raise strong*

[7] Mitchell J. Wood, "Introduction". Gay Men Living With Chronic Illnesses and Disabilities (New York: Routledge, 2004), 48.
[8] Urvashi Butalia. "Community, State and Gender: Some Reflections on the Partition of India". Women and the Politics of Violence (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 2002), 132.

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> *sons. Women are taught to be convinced of their own 'inherent weakness' from childhood and it is in opposition to this 'weakness' that male 'strength' is constructed. Hence ... gender ideology lies at the heart of the production of nationalist and militaristic thought"*[9].

There is, therefore, this need to appropriate the woman's body which acts through the nationalist discourse. Saigol continues that "the bodies of women became political signs, territories on which political programmes of the rioting communities of men are inscribed"[10]. The abstract as well as the physical body of the mother is thus deployed to construct a nation. The notion of nurturance that is supposed to surround the ideology of motherhood is appropriated with great ease by the patriarchal foundations of nationhood, that is particularly invoked in a situation of resistance against an alien ruler.

One reads a distinct male anxiety in the glorification of motherhood – the need for authentication and valour in the face of better organized cultural order of the rulers. Perhaps the threat of actual castration at the hand of other men triggered said anxiety in them. Robert D. Wilton mentions how

> *"For the fascist male, [a] fear [of castration and death] is felt not only at the level of the individual bodily ego, but: 'simultaneously through psychic forms, bodies, geographic spaces and the social order'… and it is this fear and the hatred it engenders that feed the violence directed against people positioned as other"*[11].

While this was seen in their relation with the religious other, it was also seen in their treatment of women, the sexual other.

Urvashi Butalia, in *The Other Side of Silence* mentions that "each woman who had been taken away was actually, or potentially, a mother. Within the givens of a motherhood, her sexuality could not be contained, accepted and legitimized. But as a raped or abducted mother ... this sexuality was no longer comprehensible or acceptable"[12]. Socially and ideologically, the glorified Indian mother belonged to the world of myth. The ideology of motherhood otherwise strengthened the social practice of hidden exploitation of women's bodies. It made negative contributions to the lives of women. What it above all was though, was the exercise of the same state control over individual bodies that Michel Foucault spoke of in his "Right of Death and Power over Life".

In that essay, Foucault talks about several ideas which see direct manifestations in the history of the Partition. Foucault's essay is preoccupied with the idea of the state managing individual bodies. The Partition, to begin with, is an event where the state ordained the displacement and the emplacement of millions of bodies. In addition, there

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[9] Rubina Saigol, "Militarisation, Nation and Gender: Women's Bodies as Arenas of Violent Conflict". South Asian Citizen's Web. Accessed 15 Nov 2014 <http://www.sacw.net/Wmov/RubinaSaigol.html>
[10] Ibid.
[11] Robert D. Wilton, "Locating physical disability in Freudian and lacanian psychoanalysis: problems and prospects". Social and Cultural Geography. Vol. 4, No. 3. September 2003. 383.
[12] Urvashi Butalia. The Other Side of Silence (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998),189-190.

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are questions of what happened to the bodies after the Partition, how they were managed. People were sent to cramped refugee camps, far from home. 'Bodies' or people were exchanged over the newly drawn borders. Manto's 'Toba Tek Singh' is written in such a context, where a group of mentally unstable people are being sent across the border and one of them does not know how to accept it, does not where home – Toba Tek Singh – is.

As we see in 'Toba Tek Singh' itself, one of the major preoccupations of Partition literature is the rehabilitation process. The rehabilitation went on for a decade and often meant a kind of double uprooting for the women who had, in the meantime, settled into a life after abduction on the respective 'other' sides. Debali Mookerjea-Leonard writes exactly that in the essay "Quarantined: Women and the Partition":

> *"The violence on the part of the state during the recovery mission often led to uprooting women who had settled into life in their new homes. This uprooting was normalized as benevolence, while women's rights to self-determination regarding their future domiciles (and citizenship) were obliterated. The process of repatriation objectified the women as only bodies marked by religious affiliation, and planned these bodies under the protection of the state ... The women were important only as objects, bodies to be recovered and returned to their "owners" in the place where they "belonged""*[13].

The rehabilitation was by no means an easy process. When the likes of Mridula Sarabhai undertook the project, under the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, the women themselves were not given a chance to decide whether they wanted to come back or not. There are many cases when they did not, but the government imposed a legitimate violence on their freedom to choose for themselves. They were made to leave behind their children and had to undergo forcible abortions if they were pregnant from their alliances across the border. Jisha Menon writes that

> *"the [Parliament] Bill clearly disregarded the interests of these 'abducted' women and had little interest in ascertaining whether these women had any desire to return to their original families. The Abducted Persons Act, by appointing a Tribunal, divested these women of any legal rights to choose where they wanted to stay and with whom, and violated their fundamental rights as citizens"*[14].

Upon these women's comeback, despite the government's efforts to rehabilitate them, people did not take to them kindly. Many families refused to accept these women, who had been raped, violated, converted, forcibly married and eventually, forcibly returned as well. As a result the number of destitute women who had not been accepted into their families increased, filling up government homes with these victims of the violence exacted upon their bodies by the enemy, upon their rights by the governments and upon their emotions by their family and society. Gandhiji made repeated attempts to appeal

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[13] Debali Mookerjea-Leonard. "Quarantined: Women and the Partition". Comparative Studies of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Issue 24. Accessed 15 Nov 2014 <http://www.cssaame.com/issues/24/mookerjea.pdf>
[14] Jisha Menon. "Rehearsing the Partition: Gendered Violence in 'Aur Kitne Tukde'". JSTOR. Accessed 15 Nov 2014 <www.jstor.org/stable/30232738 >

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to the masses to revise their attitude towards such women. On 7 December, 1947, he says:

> *"It is being said that the families of the abducted women no longer want to receive them back. It would be a barbarian husband or a barbarian parent who would say that he would not take back his wife and daughter. I do not think the women concerned had done anything wrong. They had been subjected to violence. To put a blot on them and to say that they are no longer fit to be accepted in society is unjust"*[15].

Despite such appeals, however, the society remained ill-equipped to negotiate with returning abductees. In this context, it is impossible not to mention Manto's 'Khuda Ki Kasam'[16]. Written from the perspective of a liason officer who works as a part of a refugee rehabilition office that specifically helps out with cases of abducted women, the story opens with almost a journalistic reporting about the abducted women:

> *"in Saharanpur, two abducted Muslim girls had refused to return to their parents who were in Pakistan. Then there was this Muslim girl in Jullundar who was given a touching farewell by the abductor's family as if she was a daughter-in-law leaving on a long journey. Some girls had commited suicide on the way, afraid of facing their parents. Some had lost their mental balance as a result of their traumatic experiences. Others had become alcoholics and used abusive and vulgar language when spoken to."* [17] .

The officer comes across an old Muslim woman looking for her daughter. One day, they see a young Sikh couple and the woman screams out to the veiled girl walking with the Sikh man, claiming that is her daughter. The officer, upon witnessing the girl look away from the old woman, understands the situation, and tells the old woman that he swears upon God (which, in translation, is the same as the title of the story) that her daughter is dead. The woman collapses.

This story brings to light the important questions that needed to be considered during rehabilitating abducted women. Like the officer in question in Manto's story mentions:

> *"When I thought about these abducted girls, I only saw their protruding bellies. What was going to happen to them and what they contained? Who would claim the end result? Pakistan or India?"*[18]

Because often, neither country could. And, in a horrific demonstration of state control on its bodies, forced abortions were organized to terminate these undesirable "end result[s]". As Tiwari writes, "the sorrows and occasional futility of the exercise of rehabilitation are laid bare" by Manto's story.

In his essay "Right of Death and Power over Life", Foucault discusses how "Sex was a means of access both the life of the body and the life of the species"[19]. This idea becomes

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[15] 15 Mookerjea-Leonard.
[16] 16 Translated by Khaled Hasan. Orphans of the Storm. (Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors Ltd., 2008), 169-174.
[17] 17 Ibid, 170.
[18] 18 Ibid.

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clearer when one understands the sexual politics at play in times like the Partition. The identity of a community or nation came to be by negating the idea of the 'other' community, quite like how the idea of the strong man was reinforced by that of the supposedly weaker sex. Collective identity of one community depended on humiliating the other community and this was done by brutalizing the women, who were – as both men and women were taught – there to be protected by the men. If a man failed to protect 'their' women, it reflected on his honour and on that of his community. Women's identities, Saigol writes, "are transformed and subsumed in this process of state-formation and nation-building"[20].

From a religious perspective as well, women's sexuality has always been quite a problematic idea. It is perhaps why the female has often been segregated from the rest of the society, by the Muslim *purdah* or the Hindu *andarmahal*. There is a preoccupation with desexualizing the women by keeping them as far away from interaction with men as possible[21]. With the rupture of the borders, these ideas of religion and nations ruptured as well, leaving behind a mad lust to penetrate borders, lives and women alike. To affront the women of one religious community was to affront the men of the same community. Therefore, even as the several thousand women were being killed and brutalized, it was never about them. It was about using them to make the enemy man feel inadequate as the protector of the honour of the community. As political power was implemented through a control of sexuality of the bodies, in Foucault's words, "sex became a crucial target of a power"[22]. At the heart of this violence was a man's primal need to establish himself as better than the opponent; the women are merely collateral damage. Their trauma is secondary to the blow sent to the man's ego.

Manto's 'Sharifan'[23] brings this idea of violence begetting violence in an infinite circle as men try to hurt other men by hurting their women with chilling clarity. In the story, Qasim rushes home to find his wife killed and is daughter Sharifan lying half-naked. He rushes out in blind rage, forcefully enters the first Hindu household he finds and brutally rapes an young girl who passes out during his animalistic attack. Later, her unconscious form reminds Qasim of her own daughter and he drapes her in a blanket. At this point, the girl's father enters the house. Upon realizing what must have happened, he rushes out of the house while calling out what is presumed to be this girl's

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[19] Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power over Life". The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction (New York: Vintage Books,1990), 146.
[20] Saigol.
[21] Rohit K. Dasgupta. "An Exodus Scripted in Blood: A Gendered Reading of the Partition". Cartographies of Affect: Across Borders in South Asia and America (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2011), 280.
[22] Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power over Life". The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction (New York: Vintage Books,1990), 147.
[23] Translated as "Bitter Harvest" by Khaled Hasan. Bitter Fruit (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008), 239-241.

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name, “Bimla!”. It becomes evident here, as Tiwari points out, that the war is between the men on both sides, but is taken out on “each other’s women”[24].

There is, in this brutality, a reflection of the desire to annihilate the enemy. In negating the woman who brings forth the race of the enemy; in violating her, the men perhaps felt a certain sense of satisfaction in having violated the sanctity of the enemy race. Jisha Menon comments on how “the perpetrators seize the female womb, which signifies the occupied territory. Rape functions symbolically as a means to pollute the generative source of the national family”[25].

The cutting of their breasts and genitalia of women could have been symbolic of putting an end to the instruments that nurture and reproduce the race of the 'other' man. They were, in a sense, quite literally the inscriptions Foucault had spoken of. In inscribing names of rapists onto a woman's body or religious messages – Hindu and Sikh slogans on the body of the Muslims and vice versa – the man simply shows this need to shake the religious and communal ground of the 'Other' kind, of the enemy. In this respect, one can draw interesting parallels to Foucault’s essay “The Body of the Condemned”.

While the essay speaks of punishment within the judiciary system, it discusses the idea of the apparently justifiable torture inflicted systematically on the body of the supposedly condemned. Something similar happens during the Partition. Foucault could well have been writing about the Partition when he wrote that “the body becomes an useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body”[26]. The women’s body in particular was both, productive as the vessel of honour and nationalist thought, and subjected to the most atrocious of violence in the name of the same accursed honour and religion. Men’s bodies too were productive to the cause of the religion – rioting, murdering, dying, raping, all in the name of their respective god(s) – and subjected to the mechanism of state and religion. The body of the perpetrator becomes an instrument for the state in a sense, while the soul imprisoned within the victim’s body is made to suffer because of its body, which in turn is also property of the state. Foucault writes

> *“the body is … directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.”*[27]

The torture and brutality is then, in the name of politics and religion, justifiable in a sense, just as the violence Foucault refers to in the beginning of his essay was believed to be[28].

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[24] 24 Tiwari.
[25] 25 Jisha Menon.
[26] 26 Michel Foucault, “The Body of the Condemned”. Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. (London: Penguin, 1977), 26.
[27] 27 Ibid 25.
[28] 28 Ibid 3.

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As the symbol of religious and nationalist feelings, in times of trouble, it is only obvious that women would be made to suffer in the name of the honour of the nation-community or the religion. One of the most infamous incidents of violence during the Partition is the incident of the Thoa Khalsa village near Rawalpindi where 96 women jumped into a well overnight to kill themselves to protect the honour of themselves and their families and their religion. Within patriarchal structures, these women were made to feel like the embodiment of the communal honour. So in times of conflict, they were both the target of the enemy as well as that of the community itself. Women proved to be an easy assault on the family or community and this motivated the men from other communities to use them as they did. What is equally common in oral narratives of the Partition are stories of women and girls being killed by family members in the name of the gods or the pride of the family. Women who were encouraged to kill themselves were valourized, but fact is, there remains no one to testify whether they did it out of a sense of honour or because the weight of another's honour was too much for them to bear. Nina Ellis Frischmen summarizes the situation as such: "At best, women saw death as a better alternative to rape and humiliation. At worst, male relatives probably coerced women to end their lives"[29].

Manto's "Khol Do"[30] is a landmark work when it comes to depicting the violence of rehabilitation. In the story, an aging man named Sirajuddin arrives at Lahore, and searches for his daughter Sakina at the Rehabilitation Camp. The volunteers assure him time and again that if she is alive, they would find her. Manto's narrative shows that they do, but speak nothing about her return to her father. Some days later, a half-dead girl is brought into the camp. The camp doctor ask Sirajuddin, who identifies the girl as his daughter, to let some fresh air into the room: "Khol do!", he says while gesturing at the window. Manto continues:

> *"The young woman on the stretcher moved slightly. Her hands groped for the cord which kept her shalwar tied round her waist. With painful slowness, she unfastened it, pulled the garment down and opened her thighs"[31].*

The girl, so used to being repeatedly violated, just hears the words and even in her state, tries to comply, perhaps because she knows the alternative is worse. The very volunteers who were supposed to protect her and bring her back to safety, who had found her as well, had exacted this terrible violence upon her body and even her mind, wherein she cannot imagine herself to be anything more than a sexual object. Priyamvada Gopal writes that Manto explores "the experience of masculinity most powerfully in the context of violence that marked nation constitution"[32]. In this case, the manic violence that perpetuated itself within the divides of 'us' and 'them' transgresses its boundaries

[29] 29 Nina Ellis Frischmen. "Silence Revealed: Women's Experiences During the Partition of India". Academia. Accessed 15 Nov 2014 <http://www.academia.edu/611322/Silence_Revealed_Womens_Experiences_during_the_Partition_of_India>
[30] 30 Translated as "The Return" by Khaled Hasan. Bitter Fruit (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008), 39-41.
[31] 31 Hasan 41.
[32] 32 Gopal 91.

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and unleashes itself into the same side. Gopal reaffirms this by saying that the story "suggests that a very thin line separates patriarchal violence from patriarchal protectionism"[33].

The story concludes as the doctor breaks out in cold sweat at Sakina's almost involuntary actions, Sirajuddin triumphantly cries out "She's alive! My daughter is alive!"[34]. Sirajuddin's actions, while symbolizing the desperate need of a father who has lost his all to believe his child is alright, it also reflects a certain blindness towards matters. Sirajuddin failed to protect his daughter and in turn, what he believes to be his honour. What is more is that the people from his community who were supposed to be the ones protecting both of these have also failed him. Should he acknowledge Sakina's fate, he must also acknowledge what the patriarchal culture has come to: mindless exploitation of women. Not even of the 'Other' community or religion. And in that the mindless violence finds an universal victim: the ultimate 'Other', the women. Sirajuddin's blindness is thus crucial to the framework of the dictum of patriarchy.

The Partition therefore brings out the nationalist and patriarchal fetish on female sexuality, where the woman's body is a stage to perform the identities that define a man – nationality, religion, community etc. It is possible that the failure to protect their women – symbolic of so much that defines themselves – made men feel a certain emotional impotence that could not be helped. That would explain the manically sexual nature of much of the crimes of this period. What becomes obvious upon looking through narratives of the Partition though is that perhaps, in 1947, the two nations got their much-sought freedom. Their women, however, never did. Manto, in his writings, never forgot this fact.

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[33] 33 Ibid 109.
[34] 34 Hasan 41.

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