

# Quarantined: Women and the Partition

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## Introduction

Responding to the problem of Hindu and Sikh families' and communities' refusal to reintegrate women sexually violated during the Partition riots and later repatriated from Pakistan, Mahatma Gandhi addressed the issue at a prayer meeting on 7 December 1947:

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 or 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.<sup>1</sup>

On 26 December 1947, he urged his audience again:

Even if the girl has been forced into marriage by a Muslim, even if she had been violated, I would still take her back with respect. I do not want that a single Hindu or Sikh should take up the attitude that if a girl has been abducted by a Muslim she is no longer acceptable to society.... If my daughter had been violated by a rascal and made pregnant, must I cast her and her child away? ...Today we are in such an unfortunate situation that some girls say that they do not want to come back, for they know that if they return they will only face disgrace and humiliation. The parents will tell them to go away, so will the husbands.<sup>2</sup>

And in January 1948, the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru also made a similar plea.<sup>3</sup> The repeated appeals, the state-sponsored homes for "unattached women," and recent feminist studies by Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, Urvashi Butalia, and Veena Das—drawing upon oral histories and official records—testify to the prevalence of the practice by families of rejecting women abducted and/or raped in the communal (religious community based) riots of 1946-7.<sup>4</sup> Contextualizing these desertions within the social production of a discourse of honor and of women's sexual purity, I examine the rejections through a reading of the Bengali feminist author Jyotirmoyee Devi's (1894-1988)

short story "Shei Chheleta" ["That Little Boy"] and novel *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* [*The River Churning*]. Jyotirmoyee Devi does not raise the question: why are women's bodies subjected to a gendered form of communal hostility?<sup>5</sup> Instead, she analyzes how women's bodies are made the preferred sites for the operation of power diffused throughout everyday domestic life. She critiques the over-emphasis on chastity and tabooed social contacts among Hindus that led to their abandoning the women abducted and/or raped during the communal riots. In doing so, her work breaks the silence surrounding the sexually-victimized women that has operated as an effective denial of their citizenship. Her writings address the representational deficiency in the social and cultural historiography of the 1947 Partition of Bengal of the large-scale gendered violence—except for token references in fiction.<sup>6</sup> The locus of the trauma in research studies has been the loss of homeland, migration, dispossession, and refugee dilemmas. Unlike Bengali *udbastu* (refugee) fiction that deals primarily with dislocation, economic struggles, and wistfulness for a lost time and place, Jyotirmoyee Devi focuses on the society-wide repression of memory of the negotiations of national borders performed on the bodies of women. She repeatedly demands accountability for the tragic consequences of Partition, interrogates the meaning of Independence, and expresses skepticism about the gendered nature and class character of its privileges.

Jyotirmoyee Devi calls attention to the ellipses of history, and especially to women's histories that are inextricable from the histories of nation-formation but which have been, until recently, only a few glosses in the margins, if not wholly omitted. After the feminist scholarship of the last twenty years, the critique of the absence of gendered national histories might not seem absolutely cutting edge, but in the 1960s, at the time the short story and the novel were published, it was radical. More radical was her embedding of these histories in the context of the national struggle at a time when the euphoria of Independence had not faded. The 1991

republishing of Jyotirmoyee Devi's writings under the aegis of the Jadavpur University School of Women's Studies, Calcutta, and the subsequent English translations from feminist presses like Kali for Women, Delhi, and Stree, Calcutta, vouch for the pivotal position of her work in contemporary feminist scholarship. It also coincides with the renewed interest in Partition since the 1980s.

### **Partition's women: "recovered" by the state, rejected in the community**

Carrying forward the preliminary feminist research on Partition by Butalia, Das, Menon, and Bhasin, my paper suggests that it is possible to link the rejections of abducted and raped women with the social production of a discourse of honor and, especially, of women's sexual purity. Imbricated in a program of Hindu cultural nationalism beginning in the nineteenth century, the discourse of women's chastity was deployed to counter issues of foreign domination.<sup>7</sup> Elite women confined to the private sphere were considered unsullied by British colonization, and their chastity was made a critical site of symbolic economies involving the nation, a site of pedagogy and mobilization for an embryonic collective political identity. That is to say, the nationalists engaged in a process of myth-making whereby feminine sexual purity was endowed with the status of *the* transcendental signifier of national virtue. (This simultaneously shielded masculine proto-nationalism from the narration of its failures.) From this period of early nationalism and high imperialism first emerges the figure of the chaste upper-caste, upper- and middle-class Hindu woman. And in her role initially as Wife, and later as Mother, it was a figure destined to function as the supreme emblem of a consolidated Hindu nationalist selfhood. This formulation of an ideal femininity did not grow out of some social pathology. Instead, it was embedded in the macrosociological dynamics of colonialism and culture, wherein the central struggle was for control over state apparatuses, property, and the law.

The Partition riots of 1946-47 and the destabilization of community alliances that they entailed also treated women's bodies as a site for the performance of identity. According to the same patriarchal logic that resulted in the mass rape of women from the "other" religious community (Muslim), the "purity" of Hindu and Sikh women became a political prerequisite for their belonging in the new nation. (In the communal violence surrounding Partition, Hindu and Sikh women sometimes committed suicide or were murdered by male kin, and these acts—designed to thwart the rival community's (Muslim) aims to dishonor the nation by violating its women—were lauded as self-sacrifice by the woman's family.) The Hindus in India viewed Partition as the loss of territory of "ancient Bharata" (Bharata is the San-

skrit word for India). They felt that, even if the "diseased limb" of this territory could be sacrificed by the Indian National Congress leadership for the independent possession of the erstwhile colonial state apparatus, the women could not be so forfeited. And newly independent India's "national honor" demanded the repossession of national property (Hindu and Sikh women) from Pakistan.

The events around Partition—the migrations, mass killings, and abductions—spurred the state to assume responsibility for the restoration of its citizens. To enable this, the Indian state entered into an Inter-Dominion Agreement with Pakistan in November 1947 and mounted a recovery mission in early December that year. While the territorial claim for Pakistan was viewed by the Congress as an unfortunate practical concession, the Pakistani government's demand for the return of the Muslim abductees was considered equally legitimate to the Congress' own demand for the return of Hindu and Sikh women. 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 placed these bodies under the protection of the state. Also, the presence of abducted Muslim women in Hindu and Sikh homes challenged the state's claims to legitimacy in the arena of international politics, and it was therefore necessary to "return" them to Pakistan. The women were important only as objects, bodies to be recovered and returned to their "owners" in the place where they "belonged," a belonging determined by the state and which advanced the state's claims both nationally (recovery of Hindu and Sikh women) and internationally (return of Muslim women). In this paper, I use Jyotirmoyee Devi's writings as a basis for exploring how women sexually abused by the rival community in the riots of Partition, unless excluded from the nation, become representative of the fallen nation.

The accumulating histories of violence and social death (exclusion from society) in the period around Partition oblige a revision of prior periods because legislations around *satidaha* (widow burning) (1829), widow remarriage (1856), the Brahma Marriage Act (1872), the Age of Consent Bill (1891), and the Sarda Bill (1929) were not discrete moments. Rather, the rejections that abducted and/or raped women experienced in the aftermath of the partition riots seem less anomalous when viewed as the culmination of developments in the legal status of Indian women over the *longue durée*. South Asian gender historians have made detailed studies of the many tumultuous debates around specific colonial

ordinances focusing on Hindu women. However, I urge the necessity for situating these discussions in a historical continuum. Nationalist anxiety about colonialism manifested itself in, and intensified, gender pathologies, and the discursive developments around chastity in the colonial and nationalist era clearly had concrete consequences for women, because their bodies were not simply sites for discourse but were also sites of patriarchal constraint and violence. The repudiation of abducted wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters was a dramatic demonstration of the fact that nationalist discursive constructions of Hindu femininity held abundant scope for violence. Nor is this simply a historical issue in South Asia. The recent escalation of Hindu nationalist/culturalist sentiments in India urges a reassessment of this essentializing ideology for women. Reports by feminist groups on the recent violence in Gujarat illustrate the transformation once again of women's bodies and sexuality during ethno-religious conflicts into an important arena for enacting emphatically modern gender pathologies. The attacks on Muslim women, mostly of childbearing age or who will soon enter their reproductive years, and the murder of children, even fetuses, adumbrates a new and, in some respects, more awful form of ethnic cleansing and partition.

In the next section of this paper, I analyze Jyotirmoyee Devi's writings on Partition as representative texts of women's experience of social hostility following their violation, as well as of the suffering resulting from their rejection at home and in their communities. However, I argue that this early moment of her writings is simply a moment of breaking the silence. It does not proceed much further analytically than to produce narrative and affect around the costs of an ideology with which everyone as part of the community was familiar. The raped woman lost, or was at least threatened with the loss of, her personhood through the violent event and the subsequent social death that followed as abducted women were uniformly rejected across differentials of caste and region. Jyotirmoyee Devi's writings measure the costs of that ideology.

### Unfinished histories: women in "*Shei Chheleta*" and *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*

Born in 1894, married and widowed at an early age, Jyotirmoyee Devi's life was largely structured by the cultural terrain of patriarchal nationalism. Although her access to economic privileges as the granddaughter of the Prime Minister to the Prince of Jaipur shielded her from the crises affecting the lives of propertyless Hindu widows and enabled her to pursue a literary career, she lived within the narrow circumference of rituals and prohibitions that ordered the social existence of women, and especially of widows. Embedded within this privileged social context, she nonetheless mustered a keen

critique of the constructed nature of gender, and of the systemic oppression of women. Her memoirs, essays, short stories, novels, and poetry cover a wide range of subjects, from women's histories, their education and gainful employment, and Hindu women's rights, to property and divorce in the Hindu Code Bill, women in the Jaipur aristocracy, the condition of prostitutes and "untouchables," to Partition and the war in Bangladesh. Her work combines insights gleaned from a hybrid library of Indian and European intellectual/philosophical traditions. In her individual capacity as a writer and feminist, she worked towards instituting women's civil, political, and human rights.

### Writing women's histories of rejection

A reading of Jyotirmoyee Devi's works suggests that the discursive developments around "ideal" womanhood in Hindu cultural nationalism, the responsibility on "the gendered and sexed female body ... to bear the burden of excessive symbolization"<sup>8</sup> played a significant role in the responses generated towards the female victims of Partition, and that "the violence of the Partition was folded into everyday relations" and the events of Partition "came to be incorporated into the temporal structure of relationships."<sup>9</sup>

Jyotirmoyee Devi's writings mark a negation of the patriarchal discourse of colonialism/nationalism by exposing the brutal and isolating practices that ritualized forms of purity demanded. The compelling question animating Jyotirmoyee Devi's short story "*Shei Chheleta*"<sup>10</sup> and novel *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*,<sup>11</sup> is not so much *how* state-intervention affected the lives of women, but rather: what happened after that? Both focus on the reception, or non-reception, of women in the community to which they had returned (or, were returned) on the basis of the religion of their fathers/brothers/husbands. Some of the questions that resonate through both texts are as follows: Why are women who were abducted, raped, and dislocated by Partition repeatedly displaced after their "recovery" to boarding schools, or to hostels for single/working women, or forced to take to begging or prostitution? What makes their reinstatement in their original families impossible? How does the symbolic burden placed on a woman by cultural nationalism produce an immediate effect on the female body? What is the status of the individual detail, and does the specific case matter?

Charting the histories of women's oppression acquires the semantics of a political project for Jyotirmoyee Devi. Questions of historical visibility or the denial thereof, the constitution of the political subject through history, and the deliberate evasions/perversion of history are central to her interests: the privilege of *who* gets to write, *whose* history is written, and *how*. That the state manipulates the process of the

dissemination of histories—for instance, the state sanctions for undergraduate studies the work of historians with certain political biases while refusing patronage to others—constitutes the core of Jyotirmoyee Devi's critique of the writing of history in the opening chapter of the novel *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*. (The project of history writing in the years immediately following Independence routinely focused on the overcoming of imperialism. As histories of the nationalist movement for the most part, these typically centered around a select group of ideologues from the Indian National Congress, detailing their role in the freedom struggle.) Although Jyotirmoyee Devi's counter-history in the novel incorporates a larger concern for the recuperation of obliterated narratives of other subordinated groups—class/caste—the focus is on women's absent histories. The novel analyzes with relentless intensity the condition of the women-victims of Partition.

Drawing upon the ancient Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*, the novel *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* was originally entitled *Itihashe Stree Parva* or *The Woman Chapter in History* ("Stree Parva" or "The Woman Chapter" is the title of one of the books in the original epic, whose generic title is "Itihasa" or "History"). However, in her authorial preface, Jyotirmoyee Devi indicates that, despite its name, "The Woman Chapter" of the *Mahabharata* was not about sufferings specific to women, but focused on general grief and bereavement for the losses incurred in the battle of Kurukshetra. She therefore refers to the epic's "Mausala Parva" or "The Book of Iron Clubs" which makes an obscure mention of the abduction and rape of the Yadava women. Critical about the silences that fill the interstices of history, Jyotirmoyee Devi draws a parallel between the suppression of women's histories of oppression in Vyas's (author of the *Mahabharata*) scant attention to the predicament of the abducted and raped women in the "Mausala Parva" and the recent historical context of Partition. Placing Partition on a comparable scale with the devastation of the subcontinent during the battle of Kurukshetra, and the violation of Yadava women after the death of their men in the battle, Jyotirmoyee Devi thus positions the Partition atrocities as constituting the epic of the modern Indian nation.

Hence, it is not coincidental that in *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* the description of the student population at the women's college at Delhi where Sutara teaches, incidentally named Yajnaseni (another name for Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*), bears traces of the Indian national anthem, although mutilated to sustain the sacred geographic relevance. (The song had been composed in undivided India.) The original line naming the different provinces runs "Punjab, Sindh, Gujarat, Maratha, Dravir (Deccan) ...," while Jyotirmoyee Devi emphasizes the all-India character of the college by writing, "There were students from all parts of the split 'mahaBharata,'

... Marathi, Gujarati, Madraji (Deccanese), Punjabi women ..."<sup>12</sup> (*maha*: great; *Bharata*: India). Conspicuously absent is the mention of Sindh (and of Sindh women in the college), since following Partition it was Pakistani territory. The violence performed on the original line from the anthem thus becomes a metaphor for the severed subcontinent as well as for the brutalities visited upon women. Opening with Sutara Datta, Assistant Professor of History, meditating on the absences in the historical discourse, *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* narrates the costs of the violence surrounding Partition, thus offering an account that deviates from the glorious textbook histories of the Indian freedom struggle. In telling a story that has been deleted, the novel provides a corrective, re-inscribing the obliterated, unspeakable women's bodily experience of the political division of the country as the new "Stree Parva," the "Woman Chapter."

While the constitutive nature of the violence in Punjab and Bengal might have been marked by regional specificities, Jyotirmoyee Devi takes a holistic approach towards understanding the dilemmas of women twice subjected to violence, initially sexual and later social. And, indeed, the refusal to reintegrate women within the community was not regionally specific. One of the textual strategies Jyotirmoyee Devi employs is to continuously bring together women from Bengal and Punjab, the two partitioned provinces: Raj (Punjabi) with Baruna and Sujata (Bengali) in "Shei Chheleta"; Sutara with Kaushalyavati, Sita Bhargava, Mataji and other women from Punjab in *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Sutara's feeling of a special affinity with her Punjabi colleagues and friends at Delhi is based on a shared history of violence, homelessness, and migrancy. That said, while the subject of Jyotirmoyee Devi's Partition fictions is the rejection of sexually assaulted women, the plots do provide indications of a qualitative difference in the character of the violence in Punjab and in Bengal. The sexual and reproductive violence Raj's mother (Punjab) is subjected to, or Kaushalyavati speaks of, is replaced by a more cultural violence for Sutara (Bengal). I use the relative "more" because despite the focus on Sutara's social marginalization, incidents of the abduction of her sister, her friends' suicides/abductions, and her personal sexual harassment are also present. The economic struggles involved with migration transform in similar ways Raj and Sutara's lives from those of the previous generation of home-bound elite women, obliging both to find gainful employment in civil society. This articulates the transitions in women's lives as they emerge as survivors in the public sphere; Jyotirmoyee Devi's feminist convictions are obvious in her repeated emphasis, in her fiction and essays, on the importance of women's financial independence.

Jyotirmoyee Devi's Partition victims are "deeply

wounded people.”<sup>14</sup> Raj’s mother (“Shei Chheleta”), Sutara, Kaushalyavati, “Mataji” (*Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*)—all are exiled subjects “who in a most organic way, are tied to a history and a place but who, overwhelmed by yet another more powerful history, must live out their days elsewhere.”<sup>15</sup> But the “elsewhere” Jyotirmoyee Devi’s women characters encounter is not only a different country but a different life outside the domestic pale, the possibilities of which they could never have foreseen, and for which they lack the correct survival skills. In “Shei Chheleta,” history violently interjects itself into Raj’s mother’s sheltered existence, ravages her home, invades her body, and eventually makes her homeless. Originally from a wealthy family and married into one, later raped and with the resulting child, Raj’s mother adjusts to the contingencies of life by perfecting her skills as a beggar and cultivating an ingratiating smile. Independence makes little sense in the lives of migrant women like her, for whom the freedom of the country is tethered to betrayals by their families, by the nation, and more substantially, by the loss of control over their bodies and the erosion of consent.

Since the narrative landscape in “Shei Chheleta” is defined by Raj, the readers are not clued in to whether Raj’s mother “chose” to migrate to India or was recovered on state initiative, a subject that animates the gendered critiques of the state in recent studies on Partition. For instance, feminist ethnographers Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in *Borders and Boundaries* and Veena Das in *Critical Events* critique state policy of intervention in displacing “abducted” women, leaving no space for their exercise of preference in their citizenship. They emphasize that many of these women, far from longing to be “recovered,” had married their abductors, borne children, settled in their new lives, and resisted state repatriation efforts. Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal on the other hand, argue that the events of abduction and rape—long before any initiative by the state to restore them to their former communities—serve as the starting point for an erosion of consent. They suggest that recent scholars “miss more than a historical nuance or two in their dogged anti-statism.”<sup>16</sup> Countering Bose and Jalal’s argument, however, Martha Nussbaum indicates that the erosion of consent has a longer history, originating not with abduction and rape but with the denial in many cases of women’s decisions pertaining to marriage.<sup>17</sup> This last point will be instantiated in what follows.

The debates around the “Recovery Mission,” however, do not constitute the point Jyotirmoyee Devi makes in her writings. She depicts the intense community disdain towards the women subjected to tabooed sexual contacts, the near-unlivability of their situation, and the possibility of spaces outside of middle-class

domesticity for raped women, as well as the bonds fostered on a shared basis of suffering.

### “Shei Chheleta”

Jyotirmoyee Devi’s short story “Shei Chheleta” is set in mid-1950s Delhi, though its plot is structured around the communal violence preceding Partition in Lahore during 1946-47. When the little girl Raj (or Rajkumari) and her family evacuate from Lahore during the riots under police protection, her mother is accidentally left behind. On arrival at Khasa near Amritsar—a “safe” place with Hindus and Sikhs in majority—the family conducts a desperate, but futile, search for the missing woman. Eventually, they assume, from reports of suicides, arson, and communal violence, that the deserted woman was killed in the riots. That is, they conclude—withstanding reports of abduction and/or rape—that she died “honorably.” Several years later, returning from work one evening, Raj—now living in the refugee colonies in Delhi—meets a beggar on Delhi-streets. This beggar is Raj’s mother, and she is accompanied by an unfamiliar little boy—the “wrong” child. She approaches Raj and her friends Baruna and Sujata for alms. Her mother recognizes her, but Raj—the “correctly” born daughter—at first bewildered at the beggar’s cross questioning, later shrinks from the embarrassed realization that her mother—who she had told her friends was dead—had been raped in the communal violence. Deliberately withholding recognition, Raj returns home, but the memory of the Lahore riots haunts her, together with her recent vision of her abandoned, destitute mother. The presence of the little boy, however, makes it difficult for her to accept the truth, and Raj decides to confront the beggar woman the following day to clarify her suspicions. But for all her searches (and later Baruna’s too) in the beggar-haunts of Delhi over the next several weeks, the mother and child are not found.

Whether it is suicide or murder, the only contingency imaginatively viable for Raj’s family is the abandoned woman’s death, implementing a deliberate closure of the other “less respectable” and sinister possibility, her abduction and rape. While the memory of a mother, whom for several years Raj considered dead, mists her eyes, the moment of the meeting with her, when comprehension of the beggar woman’s identity dawns on her, is saturated with anxiety and shame. The prospect of her mother’s alternative life is far too deviant for Raj, and the fact that she is alive causes more uneasiness than the previous assumption of her death. Raj is caught in an emotional impasse: while she realizes the beggar woman’s place in her life, she also desperately wants to believe that she is mistaken. Perhaps her mother’s retreat can be read as “shame,” as an effect of the internalization of Hindu patriarchal nationalist

norms.

The conscious omission of the mother's name is intriguing: the narrator refers to her as "Raj's mother," her mother-in-law uses "Badi Bibi," meaning eldest daughter-in-law, "Bibi" is used, especially in the Punjab, to address women; her husband calls her "Bibi"; and her brothers-in-law and their wives call her "Bibiji" ("ji" is an honorific). In addition to the routine Indian practice of identifying women by the names of their children—"Raj's mother"—this anonymity might be explained as the customary use of relational forms of address that are used to embed women in the familial to the extent that there is almost a refusal to acknowledge their individuality. Also, the deliberate oversight might allude to Raj's mother's condition as nondescript, so that by remaining nameless she could be any among the abundant casualties of the sexual and reproductive violence associated with Partition. I add that with the exception of the three young women—Raj and her friends Baruna and Sujata—everyone else is referred to by their relationship to Raj.

Jyotirmoyee Devi's narrative technique—the use of short, crisp sentences, mostly unsentimental prose except in the third section where she recounts the family's retreat from Lahore, frugal descriptions, short paragraphs and, hence, frequent breaks—intensifies the feel of the sad, broken lives she narrates.

She [Raj] lay wide awake. The vision of the beggar woman clad in a dirty salwaar kammez with a ripped chunni covering her head, a face pleading and weary, holding by the hand a boy, small and skinny like a beggar, returned to her. How long had she been begging? ...

She felt she should say something about it to her father, or to her uncles. But what if they ask why she hadn't mentioned it before? What would she say? That she had not been able to recognize her properly! Or, ... or what?

She remembered the little boy. What could she have said about him? Whose child was he? Mother's? Could Mother have come? Then why did she hide?

Perhaps the woman was not her mother after all? ... Yes, that was a possibility. A feeling of relief surged through her. The disquiet was fading. But from the deepest reaches of her mind, a thin dark, beggar woman with sad eyes, ill-clad, holding the hand of a small boy, gazed steadily at her, near the bushes of Queen's Park.

Her mother. And that little boy who wasn't her brother.<sup>18</sup>

The mother's repudiation by the family, embodied in Raj's intentional non-recognition, is combined with tacit encouragement from the community, in the figure of Raj's friend, Baruna. Baruna trusts Raj's story insofar as

the beggar woman they had met was her mother; she commiserates with Raj's loss; but when the discussion shifts to the child, she, like Raj, recoils from capitulating to the existence of another sexual life for a Mother. When the child's paternity becomes suspect, her initial compassion, "Why didn't you say so right away? You could have taken her home,"<sup>19</sup> is displaced, not by a cautionary qualification but by an outright denial, "Maybe you were not able to recognize her properly, Raj. That was not your mother." Baruna's silences, together with her definitive dismissals of the possibility, almost force the victimized mother into a "discreet disappearance,"<sup>20</sup> since, for the survival of the community's myth of its own purity, it becomes almost imperative to isolate, or negate, the raped woman. A Hindu woman's intimacy with a Muslim man would constitute a transgression on grounds of violation of the codes of conduct as well as a political betrayal of the nation, since it was along lines of religious faith—and the perceived impossibility of a harmonious coexistence—that a demand for a separate homeland for Muslims (Pakistan) was first raised and eventually led to partitioning the subcontinent.

The anxiety over the "wrong" children was not restricted to the families, but as studies by Menon, Bhasin, Butalia, and Das illustrate, debates were held in political circles to settle the perplexing issue of the citizenship of these children. Also, cognizant of the social odium women with children born from the attacks were likely to encounter, the state not only sponsored orphanages for abandoned children, but also organized clandestine mass abortions (abortion was otherwise illegal in India until 1971). It is thus important to note that, while Raj's mother must have been certain of the social contempt she would endure and perhaps had the option of terminating her pregnancy or abandoning the infant, nevertheless, she exercises her discretion in keeping him with her. In doing so, she bargains her motherhood at the cost of jeopardizing her domestic security. While the child's presence as proof of the mother's sexuality outside of marriage shatters cultural templates dictating a virtuous womanhood (fundamental to which, as noted earlier, are monogamy and chastity) and makes impossible her re-absorption in her former family/community, the child is itself an abiding proof of the failed manhood of one community. The child fathered by the Enemy is testimony to the rivals' virility in gaining control over the community's women, and thus a reminder of the national humiliation.

I concur with Veena Das's contention, in her work on national honor and practical kinship, that, "it is the ideology of the nation which insists upon ... purification."<sup>21</sup> However, I take issue with her position that, unlike the nation, "practical kinship ... knew strategies by which to absorb [women and children] within the family.... [And]

in the face of collective disaster the ... community showed a wide variety of strategic practices were available to cushion them from the consequences of this disaster."<sup>22</sup> To the contrary, empirical evidence from the work of Butalia, Menon, and Bhasin, as well as my reading of Jyotirmoyee Devi's texts, finds the community and the nation operating in an expedient alliance, so that the purity of the one supplements the purity of the other. The nation not only preserves the interests of the community but also, as Benedict Anderson has pointed out, experiences itself as a community.<sup>23</sup> I find it more useful to consider the "[f]amily, community and state ... as the three mediating and interlocking forces determining women's individual and collective destinies."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps some Hindu/Sikh women, as Das's research demonstrates, found acceptance in their original communities. Sometimes it came in exchange for their silence or after abandoning their children in the custody of social workers. However, Das, citing state-sponsored pamphlets that solicited families in an idiom of purity, to accept "reclaimed" members,<sup>25</sup> writes that "[e]ven in 1990, Menon and Bhasin (1993) found women living in camps in some cities of Punjab, either because their families had never claimed them or because they had refused to go back to their families."<sup>26</sup> Butalia claims that, for many repatriated women,

[T]he ashrams became permanent homes ... there they lived out their lives, with their memories, some unspeakable, some of which they were able to share with a similar community of women. And there many of them died ... As late as 1997 some women still remained in the ashram in Karnal; until today there are women in the Gandhi Vanita Ashram in Jalandhar.<sup>27</sup>

On a different register, and with a different status from facts and raw data, but furnishing a more textured understanding, literary writings on the horrors of Partition by Lalithambika Antherjanam, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Jyotirmoyee Devi, and Krishna Sobti also corroborate the claim that a large number of women were deserted by kin and community on the grounds of their loss of "purity." I will refer briefly to another nuanced literary moment that suggests the impossibility of a return of the "normal" in structures of intimacy ruptured by the 1947 violence: Rajinder Singh Bedi's Urdu short story "Lajwanti."<sup>28</sup>

In "Lajwanti," Bedi notes the refusal by "husbands, parents, brothers and sisters ... to recognize"<sup>29</sup> missing wives, daughters, and sisters reclaimed from Pakistan, and when the "recovered" women are brought before a crowd of waiting relatives one of them says "We don't want these sluts ... they were defiled by Muslims."<sup>30</sup> Sunderlal, in Bedi's story, welcomes home his raped wife Lajwanti after she is "rescued" from Pakistan. However, his acceptance is tempered with irony because her brief

absence has altered the dynamics of their marriage condensed in the switch from "Lajo," his former nickname for her, to "Devi" (goddess). The re-making of Lajwanti's profaned body into the sacred, inviolable body of a goddess, pushes her beyond human contact, and constitutes a denial of her embodiedness. In a move similar to that which pre-configured other women as temptresses ("sluts"), their bodies acquiring an excess of sexual charge, Lajwanti is transformed into a goddess, and thus desexualized.<sup>31</sup> While Sunderlal discursively annuls her sexuality, it remains the terrain of contest with his absent adversary, the man who abducted her and with whom she lived until she was brought to India. Sunderlal asks her whether the Other man mistreated her, and his agitated vow of compassion is prompted, not by remorse for the pain he had previously inflicted on her, but rather by an unreal threat that his wife might actually yearn for her Other life. That he transcends convention and "pardons" Lajwanti marks Sunderlal not only as different but also as superior to the rest of his community, and an all-forgiving godhood is something he arrogates to *himself*. Also, Sunderlal sanctions no space for Lajwanti to be heard; curious about "Who was he?" he halts her narrative with "Let us forget the past! You didn't do anything sinful, did you?..."<sup>32</sup> But his question seeks no answer, because, at a subterranean level he suspects that she might express her satisfaction with the quality of her Other life—and thus shatter *his* re-construction of their histories in separation; Lajwanti's continued presence in his life is provisional on the repression of her past. The return of normality in their marriage is not postponed, but prevented. The memory of the events of her abduction and rape arrests the possibility of a return to prelapsarian bliss. In addition, Sunderlal's anxiety that Lajwanti might unfavorably compare her life with him to that with her abductor is rooted in the contingency that—as Nussbaum suggests earlier—their marriage suffers from the lack of Lajwanti's genuine consent. While at some level, he struggles to overcome the intertwining of national identity with his wife's chastity (or lack thereof), other patriarchal realities nourish his anxiety.

As I discussed above, through the initial accentuation of the chastity of Hindu women as a marker of the superiority of Hindu culture, together with the later expulsions of women in contact with the Other, the woman's body functioned as a frontier safeguarding the nation and the community's collaborative interests. In her study of the role of gender in the consolidation of a Hindu identity, Sangeeta Ray also notes the scripting of difference on the body of woman by way of embedding it in a set of regulated social and cultural practices that purport to maintain a historical continuity with the past, which the Other presumably lacks:

The raped female body encompasses the sexual

economy of desire that is denied the mythologization of the purity of one's own ethnic, religious, and national gendered subject. The inevitability of rape leaves women with the "choice" of committing suicide so that she can be accommodated within the narrative of the nation as a legitimate and pure, albeit dead, citizen. Those who survive rape are refused entry into the domestic space of the new nation.... The purity of the family mirrors the purity of the nation, and the raped woman cannot be the vehicle of the familial metaphor that enables the narration of the nation.<sup>33</sup>

### Epar Ganga Opar Ganga

Ray's remark is useful in reading Jyotirmoyee Devi's later novel *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* and, despite the anger that suffuses the work in consequence of the new national citizenry's dealings with women—including those without visible signs of violation—her optimistic aesthetic intervention opens up a textual possibility for re-situating these women into the heart of middle-class domesticity.

I refer here to an excerpt from a lecture on gender injustice by former Finance Minister Professor Madhu Dandavate in which he mentioned an incident brought to his attention by Sucheta Kripalani, former Chief Minister of U. P. I cite the incident not because it offers a factual instance of the disenfranchisement women encountered, but more importantly, the incident might have been an inspiration for Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel. Instantiating his claim in the context of women's experiences of Partition that, "in a large number of cases, [the abused and/or converted Hindu] women were not welcome in their original families," Dandavate said,

What happened in Noakhali in Bengal during Gandhiji's peace march in that strife-ridden area is an epic to be remembered, narrated to me by the late Sucheta Kripalani, who had accompanied Gandhiji in his peace march to Noakhali, which succeeded in restoring peace there. One night Sucheta Kripalani received news that three young girls in Gandhiji's Peace Brigade were likely to be kidnapped. Along with the three young girls, she approached the Muslim landlord next door and requested him to protect the girls as his daughters. The Muslim landlord put his hand on the Koran and took a vow that he would fully protect the three girls. After a few months, peace returned to Noakhali. The members of Gandhiji's Peace Brigade then returned to their respective homes. When the three young girls who were protected by the Muslim landlord returned home, their parents told them. 'You have no place in our family, as you had stayed with a Muslim for three months, forgetting that you were Hindus.' 'What shall we do?' asked the girls. The parents reply was

'Go onto the streets and, if need be, become prostitutes, but our doors are closed for you.' Disowned by their parents, the girls took shelter in Gandhi's Ashram. They were never married and later on died unsung and unwept. This only reveals the grim story of women who had to suffer only because of the communal prejudices of a tradition-bound society.<sup>34</sup>

There are striking parallels between this incident and the plot of Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel, and the possibility that her daughter, Ashoka Gupta, who volunteered with Kripalani in relief work led by Gandhi in Noakhali, helping abused women, mentioned the incident to her cannot be ruled out.

The novel *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* opens with Sutara Datta, an Assistant Professor of History in a women's college, pondering over the question of omitted histories of suffering. She turns to her personal history of pain during the Noakhali riots in the autumn of 1946 and the continuing disgrace over subsequent years, and her story is then presented in a flashback. The narrative unfolds in the background of a blaze of communal violence, arson, murder, and rape in the Noakhali and Comilla districts of east Bengal subsequent to the Great Calcutta Killing in August 1946. Sutara Datta, then an adolescent, loses her parents in the communal fury: her father is murdered, her mother attempts suicide (and is eventually untraceable), and her sister Sujata is abducted. Sutara herself loses consciousness in the course of an attack. She is rescued by Tamizuddin—a Muslim family friend and neighbor to the Dattas—and his sons. Convalescing in their care for six months, she is eager to be reunited with her surviving family members, i.e., her three brothers and a sister-in-law, whereupon Tamizuddin and his sons escort her to the "safety" of Calcutta. In Calcutta, she joins her brothers and sister-in-law Bibha at the home of Bibha's parents where they have taken refuge to escape the violence of the riots. The elderly women of the household, Bibha's mother and aunts, disapprove of Sutara's presence in the family—because she spent six months living among Muslims and so is "polluted"—and hasten her further displacement. Shunned by family and the community, Sutara is sent to a Christian boarding school for women, a non-Hindu space where the student-body is primarily constituted by lower-castes or low-caste converts and women in situations similar to hers. She is especially unwanted at social events and Bibha's mother's routine snubs reach a peak on Bibha's sister Subha's wedding day when Sutara is fed separately and hurriedly sent home to protect other guests from her "polluting" touch. (And years later, at the suggestion of her mother, Bibha deliberately delays inviting Sutara so as to prevent her from attending Bibha's daughter Reba's wedding.)

Through the many years, Sutara's brothers either witness her humiliation mutely or pretend it did not happen

(Bibha's father, brother Pramode, and sister Subha protest occasionally). In the meanwhile, Sutara completes her studies and finds employment teaching history at a women's college at Delhi, realizing painfully that she will never have a "home," not only because she has no place in her brothers' affections, but also, because her marriage prospects are bleak (she is "polluted"). Her correspondence and occasional meetings with her Muslim neighbors from the village, all of whom continue to cherish her—especially Tamizuddin's wife and daughter Sakina—come to an abrupt end when Tamizuddin's wife suggests a matrimonial alliance between her elder son Aziz and Sutara. In Calcutta, Bibha's brother Pramode expresses his resolve to wed Sutara, infuriating especially his mother, who has already arranged a match for him. Nevertheless, Pramode goes to Delhi and proposes marriage to Sutara. The novel ends with her bewildered acceptance.

The novel is structured in four parts; the last three, the "Adi Parva" (The Beginning), the "Anusashana Parva" (The Disciplining), and the "Stree Parva" (The Women Chapter), derive their names from books of the *Mahabharata*; the first short section is titled "Sutara Datta." The second, third, and fourth sections plot Sutara's continuous migrancy; hence, the locale for the second is a village in Noakhali, the third Calcutta, and the fourth Delhi. Further, towards the end of the fourth section, the author hints at a future possibility of Sutara's passage to England with Pramode. Within these larger changes of location there are smaller displacements too: Sutara is transferred from her original home to that of her neighbors' at Noakhali; from the residence of her extended family to the boarding school at Calcutta. Small or large, each of the transitions also bears a permanent character, i.e., Sutara never returns to the original site, whether it is her parents' home, her Muslim neighbors at Noakhali, or to her brothers and extended family at Calcutta. Her perpetual movements advance the feeling of homelessness, and each site becomes a new place of exile. (Significantly, it is among the women refugees from West Punjab, residing at Delhi, that Sutara, for the first time, feels the bond of community, of being part of a shared history of violence.) As with Raj's mother in the short story discussed above, gendered migrancy constitutes a central trope in the novel.

The attack on Sutara, followed by her prolonged contact with the Muslim family who sheltered her, brands her as "impure," "polluted," an Other, in her "native" community, whose material practices in the performance of daily life are troubled by her presence. Her integration in her original community is almost impossible because her body carries an alternative history, the imprint of another set of practices that constitute another everyday life. The details of her life are ren-

dered meaningless for others, and the course of future events, the multiple instances of psychological harassment, is determined by the single incident of bodily violence. In stating a claim for exemplarity, Jyotirmoyee Devi furnishes a bounty of details, but she suggests simultaneously that the details are inconsequential: Sutara, like Raj's mother, could have had a particular kind of life, she could have had a particular kind of dignity, or she could have had no dignity, but the moment she is sexually assaulted she becomes a non-person, the details of whose life and personhood translate only into so many petty minutiae. The event of violation assumes the rank of *the* definitive moment of Sutara's life. It determines the plot, so that the novel itself enacts the simplification of the character socially. Sutara becomes paralyzed in deciding its conditions, in determining the status of the detail in her own life. Like Bhuvanewari Bhaduri in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?,"<sup>35</sup> the woman's (Sutara/Raj's mother) only practicable mode for signification is by the negation of a negation. However, eventually neither Raj's mother nor Sutara may be defined by the sexual violence they encounter.

Sutara's alterity is insupportable in the upper-caste Hindu family that had been made secure from all contact with the outside through discourses of cultural nationalism insisting on Hindu domesticity as the sanctuary for launching (and sculpting) a Hindu national identity. It is *difference* that constitutes community identity—different religion, different set of customs, different foods—so that communities, like nations "are forever haunted by their definitional others,"<sup>36</sup> and Sutara's position at the periphery of two rival communities makes her loyalties suspect. Thus, Jyotirmoyee Devi situates Sutara within the "woman-as-nation" paradigm, but in her writings the *fallen* woman is the symbolic representation of the nation. It is interesting to note that women's citizenship is contingent not only on residence in the right country and following the right religious faith, but also on their possessing the right (inviolable) body. In the domain of the elite home, the definitive factor for belonging was unsullied virtue.

The gender dynamics in the novel do not operate on the basis of an antagonism between men and women. Rather, excepting the gendered character of the violence during the night of the riot, the novel highlights the role of women not as "victims" of a patriarchal culture but as active in policing one another and reproducing repressive masculinity (and femininity) against women. While Jyotirmoyee Devi deems the fetish of women's bodily purity to be the cardinal cause of Sutara's miseries, she also indicates that its perpetuation was guaranteed by women who, as Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias caution, "actively participate in the process of reproducing and modifying their roles as well as being

actively involved in controlling other women.”<sup>37</sup>

As preservers of domestic sanctity, women were authorized to take crucial decisions in assessing other women’s rectitude. In *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga*, Bibha’s mother and aunts endorse the continuity of patriarchy and veto Sutara’s existence because of her contact with the forbidden that disrupted her caste and religious practices. Bibha’s mother monitors, with a reproving vigilance, the social and intimate contacts between family members. She orchestrates Sutara’s alienation both from her brothers and from the extended family, in the name of safeguarding the future for Bibha’s daughters. When Bibha’s mother’s efforts to isolate Sutara are defeated by her idealist son Pramode’s decision to marry her, she reproaches Bibha for restoring her orphaned sister-in-law (Sutara) to her extended family in Calcutta:

After a long silence, [Bibha’s mother] turned to Bibha, “I told you repeatedly not to bring that girl [Sutara] here. Don’t. Don’t get her. But you persisted! You let her stay here. Good for you! Saved your face from people’s comments. A fine thing you did ruining my family; dug a canal and courted a crocodile into my backyard.... What was the point in fetching her anyway, she who had lived with those unclean non-believers [Muslims]? Whatever happened was her misfortune. She should have stayed back. There are countless women like her in that country [Pakistan]. You think she retained her religion-caste purity living with them for such a long time? Who knows what she ate! And then, *what* had happened? *That* about which no one knows. She certainly could not have remained a Hindu living with Muslims!” Anger, disappointment, and revulsion swept through [Bibha’s mother] and she burst into tears.<sup>38</sup>

Bibha’s mother, perhaps the most vocal of all, is by no means the only character in the novel to voice such sentiments. However, it is her acknowledgment of the possibility of marriage, even in its denial, that is radical. Sutara’s stay with a “mlechchha” (impure) Muslim family realizes the worst fears of “pollution” in the upper-caste Hindu household. Her body seems to undergo a process of losing her original caste, and as a result, she is treated as a low-caste “untouchable.” As the term “untouchable” suggests, she cannot inhabit the same space as the other members of the family. At the wedding of Bibha’s sister Subha wedding, elderly women who have no clue about the exact nature of the events during the night of the attack make suggestive comments about her past, and a well-wisher warns the family that guests, especially the women, will probably refrain from participating in the wedding dinner for fear of the contagion of Sutara’s contaminating presence. It is only after Sutara escapes the supervision exercised by the patriarchal family and community and migrates to a new space of economic independence that it is possible

for her to establish some genuine social solidarity—a sisterhood with refugee women from West Punjab.

Jyotirmoyee Devi illustrates the modalities of women’s participation in social processes “as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups; as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture; as signifiers of national differences.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, the women ensure the continuation of the ideology of purity developed in the name of an abstract national good. The question that begs itself here is that, while the national patriarchy has a stake in controlling women’s sexuality ranging from material questions of property to more abstract ideas of national/community purity, why do women participate in segregating other oppressed members of their own sex? The answer lies, not in false consciousness, but perhaps in that (chaste) elite women benefited from these dissociative practices in the form of privileges patriarchy offered. They received, for instance, a greater access to the public sphere, in exchange for endorsement of the patriarchy’s views; they were even considered ethically superior, to say nothing of the experience of their empowerment.

While she is unwelcome in her native community, Sutara cannot enter into a meaningful relationship with her Muslim neighbors through marriage despite the kindness and sustenance she receives from them, because engaging with Muslims would be seen to be a betrayal of her parents’ deaths, her sister’s abduction, and her personal experience of violence. Jyotirmoyee Devi’s presentation of Sutara’s decision as a problem of love itself seems psychologically true, although official documents and recent feminist studies have illustrated that abducted women often married the men responsible for their abduction, bore children, and with time grew attached to their past abductors. So, why was a marriage proposal from Tamizuddin’s family unthinkable for Sutara? It is important to acknowledge that marriage between the abductor and abductee was made possible, at least in many cases, because the woman was totally disempowered and at the abductor’s mercy, whereas Sutara’s situation in Delhi, when the marriage proposal arrived, was different. It is difficult to predict if Sutara would have been able to resist if Tamizuddin’s family had abducted her or coerced her into marriage with Aziz while she was younger and living with them soon after the disaster, but years later in Delhi, educated and financially independent, her circumstances can no longer be compared with the helplessness of abducted women. Sadly, Sutara’s response to the marriage proposal from Tamizuddin’s family holds them guilty by association; she treats them not as individuals who sheltered her even enduring threats from their community, but rather as part of the community that devastated her life. For her, correspondence and meetings with old

Muslim friends were fine, but not the emotional commitment of marriage.

Jyotirmoyee Devi subtly reinforces the implication of Sutara's violation through such incidents as Sutara's quarantine on the night of Subha's wedding. She also jogs the reader's memory with allusions to Mary Magdalene, Lucretia, Amba, Draupadi, and Sita. However, it is critical to note that in both the short story and the novel the event of the assault that ruptures the women's "good" past lives from the "tainted" presents and futures is not central to the narrative; and in the case of the novel it is even left slightly ambiguous.

Didi [elder sister, Sujata] suddenly let out a sharp, shrill scream, "Ma, Ma, Mother, oh! Baba," and keeled over and fell to the ground.

Their mother, unlocking the door to the cowshed, was shocked. Then she said, "I'll be there right away, dear."

But Mother could not reach them [Sujata and Sutara]. Shadows had engulfed her. They were trying to seize her hand. But Mother freed herself and ran to the pond behind the house and leaped into it.

The fire had set the whole area ablaze. One of the men tried to stop her, another said, "Don't bother. Let her go, that's the mother. Leave her." Didi was nowhere, had she died?

What's the matter with Didi? Sutara did not see her again. She wanted to run to where Mother was, but her feet were caught in something and she stumbled.

And then? <sup>40</sup>

The sparse description retains a feel of the sinister and elicits the horror of the events despite the somewhat euphemistic quality of Jyotirmoyee Devi's prose. Beyond this arrested narration and another mention that, "Psychologically and physically Sutara was devastated,"<sup>41</sup> the trauma of the sexual assault resurfaces mostly as a confused, nebulous memory, with scattered references to her torn and dirty clothes, her friends' suicides, drownings, and abductions. It is referred to again in Bibha's mother's words, "And then, *what* had happened [on the night of the attack]? *That* about which no one knows." Both in the short story and the novel, the staging of sexual violence remains beyond the narrated (and the narratable?). What the novelist represents are the aftereffects of that trauma.

It is best, I feel, not to read/dismiss Jyotirmoyee Devi's syncopated, circumlocutive writing as reticence or, as residual prudery of a post-Victorian novelist, because the use of the Bengali equivalent for "rape" is not rare in her writings, especially in her essays. Rather, the veiling of bodily trauma through language constitutes a counter-discourse to the economy of display of woman. Her prose recovers something of the private pain that women suffered. Also, her seeming reluctance to engage further with the issue of violation is not to devalue the

sexual terrorization of women (she discerns the threat of sexual assault as a primary form of control over women's bodies) but rather, not to compromise the unmitigated intensity on women's rejections in their after-lives in the community. (Or, is it possible that because Sutara was destined to reenter the space of elite domesticity that Jyotirmoyee Devi chose to maintain its "sanctity"? And was her allegiance to that space responsible for withholding details of the attack on Sutara's body? Or, was it anxiety about her readership? Any of these contentions would diminish the potentials of her indisputably radical critique of patriarchy, and I feel are less valid since she was a fairly established writer at the time the novel was published.)

The initial withering away of Sutara's matrimonial possibilities, based on the single event of sexual abuse, which Bibha's mother euphemistically refers to as "other problems," illustrates how sexual violence, in a twisted way, involves a process of removing the body from circulation within the libidinal economy. Sutara is no longer allowed to desire, in fact, she is not even allowed much social agency. It is significant that between her restoration to her extended family in Calcutta and her finding employment in Delhi, she has little textual presence by way of speech. Although her condition constitutes the problematic, and she is constantly acted upon, she rarely speaks. I understand her silence not as resistance but as a metaphor for her loss of social agency through the "*theft of the body*"<sup>42</sup> (italics in original). Sutara's silence is socially structured and policed by the family: her brothers' paucity of interaction with her; by the community: her presence is unwelcome in social events; and by the state: the prohibition on biographical exchanges between students at the residential school she attends. In reinserting Sutara back into the script of middle-class domestic sexual economy, the novelist re-genders her, by way of establishing a claim for a different destiny for gender, and eventually makes the details of people's lives matter once again.

Unlike Veena Das's suggestion that marriage was a strategic practice of the community through which some repatriated women were rendered invisible through absorption within the family,<sup>43</sup> I read Pramode's wedding proposal to Sutara neither as a community game plan nor as a fairy-tale ending, but rather, as an individual act of will. Pramode and Subha, Bibha's brother and sister, witness Sutara's repeated disgrace and disenfranchisement within their family. The high points in this continuum of harassment are the quarantine on the night of Subha's wedding; the overheard gossip between their aunts insisting on Sutara's being left with the Muslims; and the deliberately delayed invitation she is sent in order to prevent her from attending her niece's wedding. (While Sutara's reinsertion within middle-class respectability might signal a compromise to

the love-interest—of which there is not much in the novel—Pramode’s proposal is not inconsistent with character-development. Both he and Subha are sensitive, even apologetic, throughout the novel, to Sutara’s distress induced by the seniors in the family.) Beyond simply constituting a “happy ending” at the level of the plot, Pramode’s proposal has a sharp feel of a conscious, if slightly patronizing, act of good will by a responsible citizen: “Very gently, Pramode asked, ‘You won’t say no, will you? We, Subha and I, talk about you often. We liked you a lot. Can’t tell whether it’s love, but we were pained by your plight. Could you try and like us?’”<sup>44</sup> Perhaps not the first admission of her distress by her kinsfolk (Pramode’s father, Amulyababu, is pained by her condition earlier on), it is nevertheless the first proactive step taken to reintegrate Sutara within the Hindu fold. Although this “restoration” within the community remains incomplete since Pramode’s impending departure for England off-centers him to some degree, it nonetheless contains a possibility, if slightly contrived, of transcending community disdain through individual arbitrations.

Re-contextualizing Sutara within bourgeois domesticity, Jyotirmoyee Devi immediately undermines the happy ending by returning to themes of the solitude of socially excluded women (hinting also at their non-reproductivity):

[Sutara] switched off the lights in her room. Stars sparkled in the dark Chaitra [March-April] sky. At the edges of the garden [surrounding the women’s dormitory] a few Eucalyptus trees stood straight and tall, apart and lonely. Like the residents of the [women’s] hostel. Solitary trees lacking shrubbery, fruits and flowers, branches and twigs. Cyclones would bend but couldn’t break them.<sup>45</sup>

Separated from middle-class domestic life, Sutara with her colleagues and friends working in the college and residing in the dormitory constitute a community, a women’s community that disregards regional differences and sustains a group-therapeutic function through a mutual support system. From a lukewarm suggestion of women’s solidarity in miniature in “Shei Chheleta,” signaled by Raj’s relief after sharing with her friend Baruna “[w]hat she had never disclosed to her near and dear ones, not even to her father, what she had concealed from her uncles, brothers, and sisters,”<sup>46</sup> the author develops and fine-tunes the idea in her novel. Writing in the 1960s, her recognition of the potentials of feminist solidarity is exceptional, although by ultimately distancing Sutara from the collective at the women’s hostel Jyotirmoyee Devi declines to advance a radical alternative to the family. Also, while Sutara’s entry into middle-class respectability marks a definitive break from the fixation with purity and routine rejections, it also weakens the possibilities of a life as a single, independent

woman. The ending of the novel raises several questions: Does Sutara’s reinstatement within the domestic space with its demands for women’s chastity suggest potentials for its reorganization? Or, on the other hand, is the act in itself a subordination of the women’s struggle to the struggle for the nation? Can it be because the nation still requires this construction to shore up its integrity?

### Conclusion

An interviewee, cites Urvashi Butalia, unable to find a rationale for the orgy of brutality he had participated in during the Partition riots, described it as temporary insanity: “[O]ne day our entire village took off to a nearby Muslim village on a killing spree. We simply went mad.”<sup>47</sup>

I contend that the rejections of women, on the other hand, cannot be explained using the language of insanity and catastrophe, or as an unleashing of the vulgar self. Rather, the rejections of abducted Hindu/Sikh women were motivated and even ideologically rationalized by a long and complicated history of the nationalist and patriarchal fetish on women’s sexuality. Hence, I suggest the need to situate the abandonments as *telos* of the political, cultural, and legal debates around elite (Hindu) women’s issues from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A revisiting of the past, I insist, tracks the violence involved in the translation from the discursive to the visceral. Using Jyotirmoyee Devi’s writings, I indicate that they offer possibilities for reconsidering the exclusive nature of community membership, the discursive violence sanctioned in the name of tradition, the recuperation of expelled bodies, and gendered citizenship as well as the exigency for women’s histories not subsumed under grand titles of national history. In writing about women’s oppression—the language for which, as she states in the preface of her novel, has not yet been developed—Jyotirmoyee Devi exposes the silence surrounding uncomfortable social issues. In populating her works with women who refuse to annul the self by suicide subsequent to the event of rape, and who instead choose to survive, her woman-centered narratives differ from the dominant narrative that recommends that women choose death to dishonor. I conclude the paper citing a factual instance of intolerance towards raped women expressed by a major proponent of non-violence: Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi not only advised women subjected to sexual violence in Noakhali in 1946 to consume poison, but in 1947 during the Partition riots he went further, exalting suicide, even murder, as deterrents to rape. In his speech at a prayer meeting on 18 September 1947, Gandhi responded to the news of devastating populist measures adopted in the face of communal violence in this way:

I have heard that many women who did not want to

lose their honor chose to die. Many men killed their own wives. I think that is really great, because I know that such things make India brave. After all, life and death is a transitory game. ... [T]hey [the women] have gone with courage. They have not sold away their honor. Not that their life was not dear to them, but they felt it was better to die than to be forcibly converted to Islam by the Muslims and allow them to assault their bodies. And so those women died. They were not just a handful, but quite a few. When I hear all these things I dance with joy that there are such brave women in India.<sup>48</sup>

Less than three months later, in early December, 1947, Gandhi, attempting to reintegrate abducted Hindu and Sikh women within their families and communities (to prevent them from becoming wards of the state), would alter his views radically and—as cited at the beginning of this paper—appeal to the public to accept, even respect, them.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (henceforth *CWMG*) Volume 98 (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1958-1994), 9. For a detailed study of Gandhi's responses towards women subjected to violence during the communal riots around Partition, see Debali Mookerjea "The Missing Chapter: Rewriting Partition History." Paper presented at the Third South Asian Women's Conference, University of California at Los Angeles and California State University at Northridge, Los Angeles, Calif., May 2000.

<sup>2</sup>Mohandas K. Gandhi, *CWMG* 98: 117-8.

<sup>3</sup>"I am told that there is an unwillingness on the part of their relatives to accept those girls and women (who have been abducted) back in their homes. This is a most objectionable and wrong attitude to take and any social custom that supports this attitude must be condemned. These girls and women require our tender and loving care and their relatives should be proud to take them back and give them every help." Jawaharlal Nehru, *Hindustan Times* (17 January 1948), cited in Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 99.

<sup>4</sup>Menon and Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries*; Menon and Bhasin, "Recovery, Rupture, Resistance: Indian State and the Abduction of Women during Partition" *Economic and Political Weekly* (24 April 1993): WS 2-11; Urvashi Butalia: "Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency during Partition," *Economic and Political Weekly* (24 April 1993): WS 12-24; and *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Delhi: Vi-

king, 1998); Veena Das, "National Honour and Practical Kinship," in Das, *Critical Events* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 55-83.

<sup>5</sup>"Devi" is not the author's last name. It reflects a Hindu-Bengali social convention of referring to upper-caste women as "Devi" meaning "goddess." Although the practice is somewhat outdated now, women writers from a past generation most of whom were from the upper castes are habitually referred to using "Devi": "Swarnakumari Devi," "Anurupa Devi," "Ashapura Devi," "Mahasweta Devi," etc. Since "Devi" fails to actually distinguish between writers, I use "Jyotirmoyee Devi" throughout this paper.

<sup>6</sup>A recent issue of *Seminar* and a collection of essays titled *The Trauma and the Triumph* have been devoted to the study of Partition in the East. *Seminar* 510 (2002); *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, eds. Jashodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, (Calcutta: Stree, 2003). By way of explaining the paucity of literary and historical writings from the erstwhile East Pakistan, Shelley Feldman suggests that the Partition of Bengal in 1947 was overshadowed by the contestation over Bengali cultural identity culminating in the Language Movement and followed by the demand for regional autonomy leading eventually to the liberation struggle in 1971. Shelley Feldman, "Feminist Interruptions: The Silence of East Bengal in the Story of Partition," *Interventions* 1:2 (1999): 167-82.

<sup>7</sup>Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, "Producing and Re-producing the New Women" in *Social Scientist*, 22:1-2 (January-February, 1994), 19-39. Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Street* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1989). Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 27-87; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

<sup>8</sup>Sangeeta Ray, *En-Gendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 135.

<sup>9</sup>Veena Das, "The Act of Witnessing: Violence, Poisonous Knowledge and Subjectivity," in *Violence and Subjectivity* Veena Das et. al., eds. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000), 220.

<sup>10</sup>Jyotirmoyee Devi, "*Shei Chheleta*" first published in 1961 in *Prabasi* (*Prabasi*, *Bhadra* 1368 BS) reprinted in *Jyotirmoyee Debir Racana-Sankalan* vol. 2, ed. Gourkishore Ghosh (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing and School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, 1994). All translations from the short story are mine. Debali Mookerjea, "That Little Boy: An English Translation of Jyotirmoyee Devi's Bengali Short Story '*Shei Chheleta*,'" *Meridians* 2:2 (2002), 128-145. All page numbers are from this text.

<sup>11</sup>Jyotirmoyee Devi, *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, in *Jyotirmoyee Debir Racana-Sankalan* vol. 1, Subir Roy Chowdhury and Abhijit Sen, eds. (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing and School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, 1991). All page numbers are from this text. Initially titled *Itihashe Stree Para*, this novel was first

published in the autumnal issue of the journal *Prabashi* in 1966; it was published in book form under its present name in 1968 ("My Words," 127). The novel has been translated into English as *The River Churning* by Enakshi Chatterjee and published by Kali for Women, 1995. However, in my work I have used my own translations.

<sup>12</sup>Jyotirmoyee Devi, *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, 129.

<sup>13</sup>Set in West Punjab, Shauna Singh Baldwin's partition-novel *What the Body Remembers* (1999) uses a similar technique to project the plight of the two communities affected by communal violence and Partition. Shauna Singh Baldwin, *What the Body Remembers* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 1999).

<sup>14</sup>C.M. Naim, *Ambiguities of Heritage* (Karachi: City Press, 1999), 176.

<sup>15</sup>Naim, *Ambiguities of Heritage*, 175-176.

<sup>16</sup>"Veena Das," Bose and Jalal claim, "has suggested how the Indian state may have impinged on the exercise of choice by raped and abducted women by creating a legal category of 'abducted women' for the purposes of its repatriation programme. While taking a strong and entirely laudable position against the many instances of violence by the post colonial state, she is curiously silent about the negation of consent and choice at the traumatic, violent moment of abduction and rape. By dramatizing, if not romanticizing, examples of murderers and rapists turned into besotted husbands of their former victims (such as a big, bearded Sikh weeping copiously at the border checkpoint), she presents a more benign picture of acceptance of raped women by families, and of kinship communities of victims and perpetrators alike, than is warranted by the historical evidence or the cultural context." Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997; London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 198-199.

<sup>17</sup>Martha Nussbaum, personal communication.

<sup>18</sup>Jyotirmoyee Devi, "Shei Chheleta," 144-145.

<sup>19</sup>Jyotirmoyee Devi, "Shei Chheleta," 144.

<sup>20</sup>Rajeswari Sundar Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (London and New York: 1993), 70.

<sup>21</sup>Das, *Critical Events*, 80

<sup>22</sup>Das, *Critical Events*, 80-81.

<sup>23</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: The Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>24</sup>Menon and Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries*, 255. Also manifest in the polemics around purity is a split between the objectives of the political state – repatriation of its citizens to the "right" country, regardless of their preferences no doubt, but more importantly of their violated condition—with that of the nation/community ensuring its purity via the chaste bodies of the women. Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner speak theoretically of a "clear disjunction ... between the nation, defined narrowly in cultural terms, and the state—the latter being the political community which both governs and grants its members citizenship." Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner, "Introduction" *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner eds. (London and New York: Zed Books, 1999), 12.

<sup>25</sup>Das, *Critical Events*, 80.

<sup>26</sup>Das, *Critical Events*, 82.

<sup>27</sup>Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 129.

<sup>28</sup>Rajinder Singh Bedi, "Lajwanti," translated by Alok Bhalla, *Stories about the Partition of India*, vol. 1, ed. Alok Bhalla (New Delhi: Indus, 1994), 54-65.

<sup>29</sup>Bedi, "Lajwanti," 58.

<sup>30</sup>Bedi, "Lajwanti," 64.

<sup>31</sup>The Punjabi folk-song the local rehabilitation committee members use to plead for acceptance of rescued women, "Do not touch lajwanti [the touch-me-not plant]/ For she will curl up and die...!" has thus a resonance with Lajwanti's life.

<sup>32</sup>Bedi, "Lajwanti," 65.

<sup>33</sup>Ray, *En-Gendering India*, 135-136.

<sup>34</sup>Professor Madhu Dandavate, "Social Roots of Gender Justice," in *The Modern Rationalist* 27:2, February 2002. Internet edition <http://www.themronline.com/200202m3.html> (20 August 2004).

<sup>35</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

<sup>36</sup>Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, Patricia Yaeger, "Introduction" *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker et. al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 5

<sup>37</sup>Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, "Introduction" *Woman-Nation-State*, eds. Yuval-Davis and Anthias (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 11.

<sup>38</sup>Jyotirmoyee Devi, *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, 243-244. Emphasis added.

<sup>39</sup>Yuval-Davis and Anthias, "Introduction," *Woman-Nation-State*, 7.

<sup>40</sup>Jyotirmoyee Devi, *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, 135-136.

<sup>41</sup>Jyotirmoyee Devi, *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, 137.

<sup>42</sup>Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" *Diacritics* 17:2 (Summer 1987): 65-81, 67.

<sup>43</sup>Das, *Critical Events*, 55-83.

<sup>44</sup>Jyotirmoyee Devi, *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, 249.

<sup>45</sup>Jyotirmoyee Devi, *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, 253.

<sup>46</sup>Jyotirmoyee Devi, "Shei Chheleta," 143.

<sup>47</sup>Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 56.

<sup>48</sup>Mohandas K. Gandhi, "Speech at a Prayer Meeting," *CW/MG*, 96: 388-389.