The Fissured Body, The Forged Nation: Gendered Violence, Recovery, and the Rehabilitation of Muslim Women in Post-Partition West Punjab (1947-1957)

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Abstract

This study analyzes the profound gendered suffering experienced by Muslim women during the 1947 Partition of India, specifically focusing on the violence, dislocation, and subsequent rehabilitation efforts within West Punjab between 1947 and 1957. The research investigates the socio-political factors that positioned women as the primary targets of communal aggression, viewing their bodies as symbolic terrain for the assertion of community honor and the humiliation of rivals. Traditional historical narratives have often marginalized these female experiences, creating a significant lacuna in Partition historiography by prioritizing political achievement over human cost. This analysis employs a gendered lens and draws extensively on oral histories to document the abduction, forced conversion, and systematic trauma faced by thousands of women in East Punjab. Furthermore, it details the monumental, uncoordinated state and voluntary efforts in West Punjab—including the implementation of the Recovery of Abducted Persons Ordinance—to facilitate the recovery, re-settlement, and complex psychological rehabilitation of these displaced and often stigmatized individuals. This work aims to restore the gender dimension to the mainstream history of the Partition.

Keywords: Partition, Gender violence, Muslim women, Abduction, Migration, Settlement

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.65463/11

The 1947 Partition of India, culminating in the creation of Pakistan, stands as one of the most cataclysmic events of the twentieth century, triggering an unprecedented demographic exchange across the newly demarcated borders. This foundational moment in South Asian history involved the displacement of approximately fourteen million people, accompanied by an appalling death toll estimated at up to two million (Khan 2007). The sheer scale of this migration and the attendant humanitarian crisis—marked by indiscriminate mass violence, arson, and looting—overshadowed, for many decades, a more insidious and structurally embedded form of conflict that fundamentally reshaped the collective memory of the event. While political narratives focused on decolonization and the triumph of nationhood, the lived experiences of the most vulnerable remained largely silenced in official histories.

Crucially, the violence that engulfed the provinces of Bengal and, most intensely, Punjab, was not merely random communal fighting; it was strategically and systematically gendered. Women, particularly Muslim women in East Punjab, became the chief sufferers and, tragically, the symbolic battleground upon which the warring communities—Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus—asserted dominance and inflicted maximum psychological damage (Bhasin and Menon 1998). In patriarchal societies, women are conventionally viewed as the custodians of community honor and religious purity, making them the most potent targets for communal degradation (Merry 2009). The abduction, rape, forced marriage, and conversion of an estimated 75,000 women during the Partition were, therefore, calculated acts of collective humiliation, designed to dismantle the social fabric of the 'enemy' group (Butalia 2000).

This essay seeks to critically analyze the multifaceted experience of Muslim women, from their victimization during the outbreak of violence to the subsequent, complex, and protracted process of recovery and settlement in the newly established state of Pakistan, specifically West Punjab, between 1947 and 1957. It will investigate the strategic underpinnings of gender-based violence, the profound psychological and social trauma inflicted upon the survivors, and the institutional, legal, and voluntary efforts undertaken by the Pakistani state and its citizens to absorb, rehabilitate, and restore these women to society. By drawing on primary documentation and previously marginalized oral accounts, this study aims to reposition the suffering, recovery, and resilience of Muslim women at the center of the Partition narrative.

The initial waves of Partition historiography, particularly in Pakistan, were dominated by a political approach focused primarily on the successful achievement of an independent Muslim homeland, often emphasizing the role of major political leaders and the Two-Nation Theory (Gilmartin 1988). The traumatic human cost, particularly the indiscriminate suffering and bloodshed, was relegated to mere footnotes or suppressed entirely under the banner of national achievement, leading to a profound silence on the subject of violence. This official narrative perpetuated a history of achievement rather than one of displacement and trauma, rendering the experiences of ordinary people, especially women, invisible.

A crucial corrective to this top-down historical vision emerged with the advent of the Subaltern school of thought and feminist

scholarship in the late 1980s and 1990s. Pioneering works by scholars like Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, and Urvashi Butalia introduced the 'Gendered Dimension' and 'Human Dimension' to the study of Partition, thereby fundamentally shifting the scholarly emphasis from political elites to the lived, brutal experiences of the populace (Bhasin and Menon 1998; Butalia 2000). These writers utilized oral histories and personal narratives, finally breaking the long-standing silence surrounding sexual violence, trauma, and the subsequent problematic state recovery process, highlighting that women were not simply objects of study but active, though muted, subjects of history.

This body of work conceptualized the female body not just as a victim, but as a central theatre of communal conflict—a "terrain through which to exchange dramatic acts of violence" (Menon 2013, 10). Scholars like Sally Engle Merry explored the cultural perspective of gender violence, arguing that women, as symbolic markers of honor and purity, become the primary targets in military or ethnic conflicts, their violation serving as a means to dishonor the enemy community (Merry 2009). Kavita Daiya further elaborated on this link, noting how the violence against women was symbolically constructed to bear both communal and national honor, linking the private suffering of the individual to the public shame of the entire group (Daiya 2002). This analytic framework is essential for understanding the unique and devastating nature of the violence inflicted upon Muslim women in East Punjab.

Furthermore, a distinct segment of the literature has focused on the complex, painful, and morally fraught aftermath of the violence: the recovery and rehabilitation of these women. Andrew J. Major's work specifically addressed the "chief sufferers," focusing on the abduction and the early stages of recovery efforts (Major 1995). Historians and relief workers, such as R. Symonds (2004), documented the immense challenge faced by the nascent Pakistani state in managing the millions of refugees and coordinating the difficult, sensitive mission to repatriate abducted women. This research intends to build upon these foundation studies, bridging the analysis of strategic violence with a detailed examination of the institutional and social responses in West Punjab, thereby completing the cycle of suffering and post-conflict resilience.

This study employs a historical methodology rooted in the analytical framework of 'gendered violence in cultural perspective,' as theorized by anthropologists like Sally Engle Merry, supplemented by the 'human dimension' approach championed by Partition historians. The central analytical tool adopted is the understanding that gender violence transcends mere physical assault; it incorporates a "greasy concept" that includes attacks on an individual's dignity, personhood, and sense of worth, with its specific forms being culturally and socially determined (Bourgois 2004, 1). This perspective allows for a critical examination of how patriarchal norms within South Asian society—where women symbolize community honor—were exploited to weaponize sexual violence during the communal conflicts, thereby making Muslim women highly vulnerable to strategic degradation by rival communities.

To execute this analysis, the study relies on a triangulation of primary sources: first, archival documents related to government policies, ordinances, and official statistics concerning refugees and recovery operations

in West Punjab; second, the extensive use of oral history, which includes first-hand accounts and interviews from survivors—Murko Begum, Jannat Bibi, Anwar Bibi, Azizan Bibi, and others—as recorded in the provided thesis data (Kiran 2017). Oral accounts are crucial for documenting the experiences of the marginalized, providing the emotional and lived truth often omitted by official records, thus "restor[ing] women to history and to restore history to women" (Butalia 2000). This methodology allows the narrative to move beyond raw numbers to explore the trauma, fear, and eventual resilience of the individuals involved.

The reliance on oral accounts and primary-source-based analysis is further contextualized by the incorporation of academic literature that utilizes fictional representations, such as Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* (Dey 2018), as historical proxies for understanding the psychological and social fragmentation caused by the violence. Given the sensitive and often untold nature of sexual trauma, fiction often reflects the cultural understanding and memory of events that formal archives fail to capture. The study maintains ethical consideration by recognizing the emotional burden carried by survivors and interpreting their accounts not just as facts, but as narratives shaped by memory, trauma, and decades of silence (Virdee 2013). This multi-source methodology ensures a comprehensive, emotionally resonant, and academically rigorous depiction of the post-Partition recovery process.

The Outbreak of Violence and the Terrain of the Body (1946–1947)

The groundwork for the catastrophic violence in Punjab was laid long before the formal division in August 1947, tracing back to the political escalation following the failure of the Cabinet Mission Plan and the subsequent Direct Action Day in August 1946. The communal rioting that initially flared in Calcutta quickly spread to Bombay, East Bengal, and then with devastating effect to Rawalpindi in March 1947. This period, characterized by escalating inter-community mistrust and political breakdown, created the conditions of impunity necessary for organized violence to take root, setting the stage for what was fundamentally a territorial struggle masquerading as a religious war (Brass 2003). The political demands for a separate homeland were rapidly translated into localized aggression, where neighbors turned on neighbors, fundamentally altering the pre-existing social harmony across the region.

The violence, particularly against women, was underpinned by the principles of Strategic Rape Theory, which posits that sexual assault is a calculated, tactical instrument used in conflict to achieve political and cultural supremacy (Peltola n.d., 24-27). John Gottchall's assertion that rape is a "calculated tool" designed to humiliate, degrade, and terrorize the enemy applies perfectly to the Partition context, where the violation of Muslim women was often public, performed in front of their male relatives, to inflict maximum dishonor (Gottchall, cited in Peltola, n.d.). This was an act of deliberate, strategic warfare, aimed not just at the individual woman but at the collective identity, self-worth, and dignity of the entire community, proving to the men that they were powerless to protect their most sacred symbols of honor.

Paul R. Brass, citing Governor Evan Jenkins's memorandum to Mountbatten, divided the violence in Punjab into three discernible phases, indicating a clear,

escalating trajectory from initial urban skirmishes to full-scale communal war (Brass 2003). The first phase, from March 4 to March 20, 1947, saw localized outbreaks in Lahore that quickly spread, resulting in heavy casualties and the initial burning of villages, primarily affecting Muslim communities in the West Punjab (Jenkins' memo, cited in Brass 2003). The second phase, extending to early May, marked a transition to more serious, organized rioting in cities like Amritsar, solidifying the communal divide and demonstrating that the violence was becoming increasingly difficult for the failing administration to contain.

The third and most devastating phase, from May 10 onwards, escalated into what Jenkins called a "communal war of succession," characterized by widespread murder, arson, loot, and, critically, systematic abduction and rape across both sides of the province (Brass 2003, 65). This phase witnessed the full mobilization of militant groups, notably the Sikh *jathas*, who, fueled by aggressive slogans like "Raj karygi Khalsa," targeted Muslim villages, killing men and kidnapping women in coordinated strikes (Iftikhar 1991, 120). The administration, often crippled or complicit, failed to provide protection, leaving the populace vulnerable to large crowds that showed no mercy, transforming the struggle into a localized battle for social and physical space (Jalal 2013).

The cities of Amritsar and Jalandhar, both Muslim-majority areas ceded to India, became key flashpoints where the institutional breakdown was most apparent, accelerating the violence against Muslim women. Shamim Jallundary, a Muslim League worker, recounted the unchecked violence in Jalandhar, where men were killed and women were kidnapped and raped (Jallundhry 1981). The situation in Amritsar was particularly dire, with Master Tara Singh's inflammatory rhetoric being directly translated into brutal action; he later admitted to the killing of Muslim men and the humiliation of women (Dar 2003, 150). Shockingly, accounts indicate police and army officers were sometimes complicit, with abducted Muslim women allegedly being divided as spoils of war among police and military personnel, and held in 'safe-custody' for the enjoyment of officials (Kidwai, cited in Dar 2003).

The oppression was not limited to the core Punjab districts; it extended to the princely states, such as Patiala and Gurgaon, which faced intense communal violence, often influenced by exaggerated tales of atrocities from migrating refugees (Dar 2003). In Patiala, a Sikh state, Muslim women were treated with horrific brutality, triggered partly by exaggerated accounts of the Rawalpindi massacre that fueled Sikh retaliatory anger. In this atmosphere of escalating vengeance, women were viewed as easy targets, not just for rape and abduction, but for forcible conversion, which was viewed as a final, definitive victory over the enemy community by symbolically capturing their faith and progeny (Daiya 2002).

In a tragic paradox of communal honor, the second type of violence women faced came from their own kinsmen. To avoid the public dishonor of abduction, rape, or forced conversion at the hands of the enemy, Muslim men sometimes performed preemptive 'honor killings' or forced their women to commit suicide, often by jumping into wells (Butalia 2000, 102). This horrifying choice—between death by one's own hand or the shame of 'pollution'—is the clearest

evidence that women were treated as boundary markers and objects of honor, rather than autonomous human beings (Umar and Fozia Umar 2002). The story of Sakina in Saadat Hassan Manto's *Khol Do*, though fictional, vividly captures the reality that Muslim women's bodies were abused not only by the rival community but also by their own community members who were meant to be their protectors.

The Ordeal of Migration: Trauma and Dispossession

The mass exodus that followed the boundary announcement was the largest, most violent, and most chaotic displacement of people in human history, with millions crossing the hastily drawn Radcliffe Line in both directions (Khalidi 1998, 340-341). For Muslim women in East Punjab, the act of migration was not a journey to safety but a highly dangerous, protracted ordeal of dispossession, vulnerability, and sustained trauma. The official figure of 75,000 women abducted from both sides only hints at the magnitude of sexual violence, a number which Jawaharlal Nehru himself admitted was likely underestimated, stating that "tens of thousands still remain" missing (Nehru, cited in Major 1995, 120).

Migration was undertaken through different modes—foot convoys, trains, and, for the privileged, military trucks or air travel—reflecting the deep social class divisions within the refugee population, a phenomenon analyzed through the lens of Marxist social stratification (Kaur 2006, 1948-1950). The lower and middle classes, forced to rely on foot caravans and the precarious, often compromised railway system, bore the brunt of the violence. Foot convoys, stretching for miles, were soft targets, constantly vulnerable to raids and attacks by organized armed mobs, where women and girls were easily snatched amidst the resulting chaos and panic (Kaur 2011).

The infamous "graveyard trains," carrying Muslim refugees from East Punjab to Lahore, became symbols of the partition's ultimate brutality. These special refugee trains were frequently attacked, looted, and arrived at their destinations filled with the mutilated bodies of hundreds of victims, an act of sheer terror and retribution that fueled the cycle of violence on the receiving end (Kaur 2011, 238-239). The experience of Haji M. Yasin, who was warned by a railway employee that his train's Hindu driver planned to halt the carriage for a planned mob attack, underscores the institutional complicity and the deliberate manufacturing of terror that characterized the journey (Yasin 2009). The transportation system itself became a weapon of war, maximizing the displacement trauma.

Oral accounts provide the most chilling insight into the trauma of transit. Murko Begum, a survivor from Amritsar, shared memories of Hindu and Sikh *jathas* attacking her village, leading to her brother's death and a terrifying flight via a refugee train (Murko Begum interview). Jannat Bibi's family was caught in the chaos of a foot convoy, escaping her Hoshiyarpur village only to face further displacement, emphasizing the relentless, multi-stage nature of the trauma—violence in the village followed by violence in transit, followed by the destitution of the refugee camp (Jannat Bibi interview). These accounts highlight how the trauma was not singular but a composite of displacement, loss, witnessing atrocities, and constant fear.

For the abducted women, the ordeal was transformed into one of physical and

symbolic dispossession. Beyond the sexual violence, they were subjected to forced conversion to the abductor's religion, often marked with indelible symbols, such as tattoos, a practice that literally branded them as perpetual symbols of communal conquest (Butalia 2000, 150-151). The recovered girls from Amritsar and Ambala recounted being dragged to temples and having their bodies tattooed with Sikh religious slogans by their captors, permanently altering their religious and social identity (Jallundhry 1981, 105). This marking was a clear attempt to enforce a new identity and make return to their former lives and communities virtually impossible, creating a permanent boundary line on their very skin.

The collective trauma of the Partition, particularly the systematic targeting of women, invites comparison with other state-sponsored genocidal events, most notably the Holocaust (Feryn n.d.). In both events, women were targeted based on their caste or religious identity—the Aryan race concept in the Holocaust and religious identity in Partition—and subjected to public humiliation, sexual violence, and mass murder as a means of collective degradation (Williams 2021). The use of trains as death carriers, turning human transport into mobile graves, is a horrifying similarity that links the two events. These parallels underscore that the violence against Muslim women in 1947 was not simply a consequence of riotous mobs but a systematic breakdown of moral values, driven by the calculated desire to destroy the social and religious identity of the perceived enemy.

The stories of women like Niamat Bibi (later known as Gurdev Singh) who was kidnapped and converted to Sikhism, only to reunite with her family decades later through digital media, illustrate the long-term, inter-generational impact of these forced changes of identity (Kiran 2017, 172-173). The deliberate act of separating women from their families, coupled with the systemic failure of the civil administration and police—who were often complicit or inert—in East Punjab, left an irreparable scar on the social fabric of the newly forming Pakistan, creating a vast humanitarian and political crisis that the nascent government was wholly unprepared to address (Wolpert 2006).

Recovery and Rehabilitation in West Punjab (1947–1957)

The arrival of approximately seven million Muslim refugees, with seventy percent funneling into the West Punjab province, immediately presented the newly established Pakistani state with its toughest administrative and humanitarian challenge. With no prior expectation of a migration of this magnitude, there were virtually no resources, infrastructure, or coherent plans in place to provide the necessary food, shelter, and medical attention for the injured and sick, particularly the thousands of traumatized women (Hassan 2006, 12-14). The government, resource-deficient and newly formed, faced an overwhelming task that could only be managed through a fusion of institutional policy and massive voluntary effort.

To address the immediate crisis, refugee camps were hastily established in large population centers, utilizing existing buildings, schools, and even colleges—such as the Islamia College—as temporary shelters. The massive Walton camp near Lahore alone was designed to house up to 40,000 refugees, though its capacity was

quickly overwhelmed by the endless streams of foot convoys and train arrivals (Talbot 2006, 120). Initial settlement efforts included the establishment of new colonies, such as "MahajrAbad" in Samnabad, Lahore, where properties were allotted based on family size, demonstrating an early attempt by the government to transition refugees from temporary camps to permanent housing (Rukhsana Khatun interview).

The institutional response was formalized with the creation of the Ministry of Refugees and Rehabilitation in September 1947, initially headed by Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan, with the head office eventually moving to Lahore, the epicenter of the crisis, under Mian Iftikhar din (Sohail 1991, 130). This ministry was tasked not only with shelter and food distribution but also with the crucial legal task of managing 'evacuee property' through acts like the Protection of Evacuee Property Act (1948), which preserved the assets of those who had fled to India, creating a pool of resources for the compensation and resettlement of the incoming Muslim refugees (Latif 2013).

However, the state's efforts would have been crippled without the monumental contribution of voluntary women's organizations and individual female leaders. Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan, recognizing the urgent need for trained personnel, organized the Pakistan Volunteer Service in 1948, which mobilized settled women to assist their displaced 'sisters' (Masroor n.d., 180). This movement was critical in addressing the severe medical deficit, as Muslim women were historically not permitted to become nurses; therefore, Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan and Fatima Jinnah personally oversaw the training of women to provide first aid and mental assistance to the traumatized refugees in the camps (Hussain 1990, 50-51).

The voluntary efforts extended beyond basic aid into social and skill rehabilitation. Organizations like the Women Refugee Relief Committee, led by Begum Geeti Ara, focused specifically on the sensitive issues of orphans and unaccompanied females, resulting in the establishment of centers like "Qasar-i-Istiqlal" to provide vocational training and skills to refugee women, ensuring their economic independence in the new state (Hussain 1990, 60). Fatima Begum, Principal of Islamia College, played a heroic individual role, mobilizing her students to work daily in the camps, collecting funds and food, and even sheltering families in her own home, symbolizing the powerful emotional and moral acceptance offered by Pakistani society (Jallundhry 1981, 110).

Following the immediate relief, the state turned its attention to the politically and morally charged issue of the recovery of abducted women, a mission complicated by the depth of communal hatred and the lack of cooperation across the border. Both governments, acknowledging the humanitarian disgrace, signed the critical Inter-Dominion Agreement on November 11, 1948, which institutionalized the recovery process (List of Abducted women and Children in India 1950, 10). This agreement mandated a joint effort, stipulating that the country where the abduction occurred was responsible for recovery, and provided for the exchange of recovered women at transit camps like the one in Lahore.

The recovery mission, officially conducted in three stages from September 1947 to December 1948, relied on small batches of police and, crucially, women social workers like Kamla Patel from India and Fatima Begum from Pakistan, who

crossed the volatile borders risking their own safety (Symonds 2004, 150). The data shows a concerted effort, with the table detailing the recovery of 12,921 women and children from various East Punjab districts between 1947 and 1955, underscoring the scale of the organized abduction (List of Abducted women and Children in India 1950, 12).

To provide the legal teeth necessary for this sensitive operation, the Pakistan (Recovery of Abducted Persons) Ordinance 1949 was enacted (The All Pakistan decisions 1949). This ordinance legally defined "Abducted Persons" as any male child under 16 or any female of whatever age separated from her family and found living under the control of a Hindu or Sikh individual or family (The All Pakistan Legal Decisions 1949, 10-11). It established the framework for government-run "camps" for reception and detention and, critically, instituted a special "tribunal" to decide cases where a recovered woman was unwilling to return to her family, acknowledging the complex moral and psychological pressures surrounding return.

The aftermath of recovery was often the most complex challenge. Many recovered women were traumatized, sometimes pregnant, or had developed emotional bonds with their abductors, and many feared the stigma of 'pollution' and rejection by their own families in Pakistan (Butalia 2000, 180). The families in Pakistan, however, generally displayed a welcoming and accepting attitude, morally supported by the state's narrative that these women were victims and symbols of the nation's struggle, not figures of shame (Major 1995). The warm welcome provided by families and the moral support of women like Fatima Begum, who gave shelter and emotional counseling to those without kin, were vital in facilitating their return to normal life and healing the psychological wounds of the Partition.

Conclusion

The Partition of India in 1947 was a moment of profound national transformation, yet its history remains shadowed by the unacknowledged suffering of its most vulnerable victims. This study has established that Muslim women in West Punjab were not merely passive recipients of the era's chaos, but were strategically targeted in a gendered war that utilized their bodies as a symbolic terrain for the systematic assertion of communal dominance and the humiliation of the enemy. The violence—ranging from large-scale abductions and rape to the tragic paradox of honor-killings by their own kinsmen—was not an unfortunate byproduct of mass migration, but a calculated, brutal strategy of ethnic cleansing, driven by the desire to destroy the moral and social fabric of the rival community.

However, the post-Partition period revealed an equally momentous narrative of institutional adaptation and immense civic resilience within the nascent state of Pakistan. Despite overwhelming resource deficiencies, the government's rapid establishment of the Ministry of Refugees and the legal framework of the Pakistan (Recovery of Abducted Persons) Ordinance 1949 demonstrated a clear, albeit complex, commitment to recovery. More significantly, the rehabilitation was propelled forward by the self-sacrificing efforts of local Pakistani women, mobilized through organizations like the Pakistan Volunteer Service, who provided medical care, skills training, and, most critically, the moral and emotional acceptance necessary for the traumatized survivors to reintegrate. Restoring the stories

of these survivors and the women who aided them—the Murko Begums, the Fatima Begums, and the nameless volunteers—is not just an academic exercise, but a necessary act of historical justice, ensuring that the gendered dimension of suffering and resilience occupies its rightful, central place in the historiography of the Partition.

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