

Mar-2019

# Sacks of Mutilated Breasts: Violence and Body Politics in South Asian Partition Literature

Antonia Navarro-Tejero

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Navarro-Tejero, Antonia (2019). Sacks of Mutilated Breasts: Violence and Body Politics in South Asian Partition Literature. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(3), 44-50.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss3/5>

## **Sacks of Mutilated Breasts: Violence and Body Politics in South Asian Partition Literature<sup>1</sup>**

By Antonia Navarro-Tejero<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

The partition narratives of South Asian authors are testimony to the fact that women of all ethnic and religious backgrounds were the greatest victims of the newly created border between India and Pakistan in 1947. Women's bodies were abducted, stripped naked, raped, mutilated (their breasts cut off), carved with religious symbols and murdered to be sent in train wagons to the "other" side of the border. Taking Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice Candy Man/Cracking India* (1988) as a narrative example of the importance of women's point of view and as central figures of the violent conflict, we will examine the symbol of the female breasts, following Judith Butler's and Michel Foucault's theories on power and governmentality, framed in the rhetoric of Mother India, as the violence inflicted upon women was equivalent to a sacrilege against one's religion, family and country. Therefore, we will examine the passage of sacks of mutilated breasts as a terrifying testimonio about Partition history fictionally recalled, but also as a metaphor of the border crossing which threatens the stability of the nation. In the light of Julia Kristen's theory on the abjection, we will interpret the female corpses with mutilated breasts as objects which blur the limits of a normative society, displaying its fragility. We will conclude by asserting that the novel discussed in this paper can be read as a harsh indictment of both a violent de/colonial process and local misogynist corruption (lessons from History) as well as a weapon of feminist resistance (doing Herstory). Women's mutilated bodies are uncovered by authors such as Bapsi Sidhwa in order to expose the tragedy and trauma so that the history/body dialectic (a tale of the violation of women's rights) can be, as a consequence, also uncovered.

*Keywords:* Communal rape, Nationalism, Mutilated breasts, South Asia, South Asian literature

### **Introduction**

This paper focuses on Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* (1988) as an exploration of the treatment of female bodies in the discursive articulation of nationalism. The partition narratives of South Asian authors are testimony to the fact that women of all ethnic and religious backgrounds were the greatest victims of the newly created border between India and Pakistan in 1947. Particularly, *Cracking India*, tells us the story of the dehumanizing sexual violence women suffered during this historical event. According to Mohanram, the suffering of women refugees during the 1947 partition has been the focus of research only in the past twenty years. The horrific statistics that surround women refugees—between 75,000-100,000 Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh women who were abducted by men of the other communities, subjected to multiple rapes, mutilations, and, for some, forced marriages and conversions—is matched by the treatment of the abducted women in the hands of the nation-state (14). Das accounts that in the Constituent Assembly in 1949, it was recorded that of the 50,000 Muslim women abducted in India,

---

<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to acknowledge the funding provided by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Research Project "Bodies in Transit 2," ref. FFI2017-84555-C2-1-P) and the European Regional Development Fund for the writing of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Antonia Navarro-Tejero, founder of the Spanish Association for Interdisciplinary India Studies, is Associate Professor at the University of Córdoba (Spain). She can be reached at antonia.navarro@uco.es.

8,000 were recovered, and of the 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women abducted, 12,000 were recovered (20-21). There is no doubt that the sexual crimes committed against girls and women at times of conflict are a direct consequence of the appropriation of women's bodies for symbolic uses within the dialectics of patriarchal communalism, and *Cracking India* portrays women as sexual objects and cultural symbols that grounds ethnic sexual violence.

### **Sacks of Mutilated Breasts: Violated Women's Bodies as Messages.**

In the midst of Partition communal violence, Ice Candy Man waits for his sisters at a Lahore railway station, and when the train arrives from Gurdaspur unexpectedly loaded with mutilated bodies of Muslim women and sacks full of breasts, he shouts "Everyone is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslims. There are no young women among the dead. Only two gunny bags full of women's breasts" (159). The amputation of women's breasts is one of the most gruesome injuries faced by the women, since according to Menon and Bhasin, "amputating her breasts at once desexualizes a woman and negates her as wife and mother; no longer a nurturer (if she survives, that is) she remains a permanently inauspicious figure, almost as undesirable as a barren woman" (44). In nationalist terms, the mutilated breasts can be read as a sign of the intention to remove the enemy's community, though this is not the only atrocity committed against women.

Ranna, another child victim in the novel, remembers the story of how the Sikhs attacked his village, raping and kidnapping many women, among them, his mother and his sisters, and how he survived and reached Lahore: "They are killing all Muslims. Setting fires, looting, parading Muslim women naked through the streets—raping and mutilating them in the center of the villages and in mosques [...] There is an intolerable stench where the bodies, caught in bends, have piled up" (209). Ranna was presumed dead by the rioters and conducted to the mosque in a truck full of death bodies, and being the spectator of "men copulated with wailing children—old and young women. He saw a naked woman, her light Kashmiri skin bruised with purpled splotches and cuts, hanging head down from a ceiling fan. [...] jeering men set her long hair on fire. He saw babies, snatched from their mothers, smashed against walls and their howling mothers brutally raped and killed" (218-219). This fictional passage resembles Menon's and Bhasin's real catalogue of the specific features of communal crimes against women during the Partition riots such as "stripping; parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding their breasts and genitalia with triumphal slogans like "Pakistan, *Zindabad!*" or "Hindustan, *Zindabad!*"; amputating breasts; knifing open the womb; raping, of course; killing foetuses" (43). Since the tragical historical event took place, writers and artists of both sexes have accounted how women's bodies were abducted and murdered to be sent in train wagons to the 'other' side of the border.

In the novel, having been witness of the sacks full of mutilated breasts turns Ice Candy Man into a beast whose range is uncontrollable: "I lose my senses when I think of the mutilated bodies on that train [...] that night I went mad, I tell you: I lobbed grenades through the windows of Hindus and Sikhs I'd known all my life! [...] I want to kill someone for each of the breasts they cut off the Muslim women" (156). This act of violence against Muslim women spurs Ice Candy Man to inflict violence on Hindu and Sikh women, and Ayah becomes the victim upon which he inflicts the most cruelty even though he is supposedly in love with her. He satiates his appetite for revenge by kidnapping her and making her a sexual slave while forcing her to convert to Islam and to marry him. Ayah is represented just as a body, and is detached from any identity so that his admiration for her is transformed into the hatred he now feels against Hindus. He gets her gang-raped by a group of fanatics to avenge his hurt pride. Ayah (notice that although she has a name, she is always referred to as simply 'nanny') is deprived of any personal identity, becoming after the incident a 'Hindu woman' who needs to be punished for the atrocities committed by her community.

For Scarry, when referring to empathy, the difference between being in pain and seeing another in pain is the difference between apodictic certainty and radical doubt, as she states that when "one hears

about another person's pain, the events happening within the interior of that person's body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact [...] it may seem as distant as the interstellar events referred to by scientists" (1). She further explains that pain is so isolating that we are in absolute confidence when we are in pain but in severe doubt when another appears to be. In this way, Ice Candy Man is unable to feel empathy towards his beloved's suffering as he dehumanized her by turning her into a monolithic Hindu to be hated. However, it is important to also note that what turns Ice Candy Man into a predator is not his feelings of solidarity or empathy towards those mutilated women and the suffering they must have endured, but the insult to his masculinity that the violated bodies represent.

In Ice Candy Man's discourse (the nationalist one), women are not represented as victims of the massacre, as it is the male recipients of the message brought through women's mutilated bodies that are considered to be victims of the violent acts resulting from the communal conflict. This passage exposes the instrumentalization of women's bodies in a patriarchal society in the sense that the female body is envisioned socially as a mere product to be used and discarded as an instrument of nationalism and retaliation. He does not look at Ayah as a person, but as a message to be returned due to the fact that the mutilated women's bodies were read as missives between communities. This contradictory episode could only happen because he read the mutilated bodies in patriarchal terms, that is, such brutal violence against women acquires significance as a semiotic rather than an embodied act. The massacre is therefore reproduced by the men of every community only because women's bodies become messages and not the site of violence.

As Roy states, women become "the worst victims of atrocities during civil strife as victories against the enemy are inscribed, marked and celebrated on their bodies" (72). Menon and Bhasin also claimed that "women's sexuality symbolizes 'manhood;' its desecration is a matter of such shame and dishonour that it has to be avenged. Yet, with the cruel logic of all such violence, it is women ultimately who are most violently dealt with as a consequence" (43). Women's bodies are construed as being nothing more than the receptacles of a man's honor—and the act of violation emphasizes precisely this role of women as objects in male constructions of their own honor. The tragedy here simply lies in the fact that Ice Candy Man's masculinity was violated.

### **Raping the Nation: Object Bodies and Fallen Women**

According to Martín-Lucas, "In the Indian subcontinent, rape has been massively perpetrated in contexts of conflict, from the first partition war between India and Pakistan in 1947 [...] following the common patriarchal premise that women's bodies are the repository of men's honour" (54). During the communal riots of the Partition, women were abducted from their homes and raped; many of them set themselves ablaze and sometimes all the women in the family committed mass suicide. Women died trying to avoid sexual violation as they felt they needed to preserve their chastity in order to protect their family honor. In the novel, the child Ranna appreciates that those women in his family, "rather than face the brutality of the mob they will pour kerosene around the house and burn themselves" (210). According to Nandy, Indian women are posited as nation and framed in the rhetoric of Mother India (92), and as a consequence their bodies considered as the repository of men's honor. As they are regarded the recipient of the nation, to rape them meant the rupture of traditions, as Pandey states that "the rape of a woman is akin to the rape of the community to which she belongs" (105). The notion of purity, so much interiorized in South Asian societies (as in many others), reinforces the nationalist rhetoric about women's purity and defilement which locks them into a discourse where sexual violence is a form of dishonor that amounts to social death and therefore makes the victim desire her physical death, as according to Menon and Bhasin, "the notions of shame and honour are so ingrained and have been internalised as successfully by men and women, both, that death which has been forced onto a woman may quite easily be considered a 'willing sacrifice' even by women themselves" (46).

However, those who could not avoid rape even with their own death had to live with the stigma of being labelled as ‘fallen women.’ Another form of violence these women were subjected to was their sacrifice by their families in order to save the community honor. In most cases, they were discarded by their families and sent to recovering camps,<sup>3</sup> which were seen by the child narrator Lenny as jails in her conversation with Hamida: “Why were you in jail? I ask at last” “It isn’t a jail, Lenny baby... It is a camp for fallen women” [...] “Are you a fallen woman?” “*Hai*, my fate!” moans Hamida, suddenly slapping her forehead. She rocks on her heels and makes a crazy keening noise, sucking and expelling the air between her teeth” (226). Hamida reincarnates the role of the fallen women, a woman who has children but due to her abduction and rape her family does not want her return home. As Menon and Bhasin put it, “so powerful and general was the belief that safeguarding a woman’s honour is essential to upholding male and community honour that a whole new order of violence came into play, by men against their own kinswomen; and by women against their daughters or sisters and their own selves” (44). Therefore, infliction upon women is produced by two intersecting vectors of violence within and between family and community. The concentration of both kinds of violence onto the same body (the symbolic site) is what Menon and Basin describe as “a continuum of violence that had death at the hands of one’s own kinsmen at one end, and rape and brutalisation by men of the other community at the other” (57).

The numerous anonymous mutilated bodies mentioned in the novel along with Ayah’s are polluted bodies who transgress the borders (national in the case of corpses sent in trains from one side to the other, and ethnic in the case of rapes by members of the other community). These women transform themselves into abject bodies once they have been abducted and raped, a sign of collective dishonouring. Sarkar explains that the “same patriarchal order that designates the female body as the symbol of lineage and community purity, would designate the entire collectivity as impure and polluted, once the woman is raped by an outsider” (2875). Women’s bodies are instrumentalized, as the ‘polluted’ body is othered and marked as no longer useful for its symbolic attributes of cultural purity. In the novel, Godmother puts it simply: “People—can’t stand their women being touched by other men” (227).

For Kristeva the abject manifests “in anything in fact that threatens rigid boundaries and evokes powerful fears of filth, pollution, contamination, and defilement” (quoted in Jay, 146). When we are propelled into the world of the abject, our imaginary borders disintegrate and the abject becomes a tangible threat because our identity system and conception of order has been disrupted. The abject is located in a liminal state that is on the margins of two positions, it “neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or law; but turns them aside” (15). What disturbs identity, system, order is the cause of abjection. These scenes, within the context of nationalism, rework Kristeva’s views of the abject, particularly in reference to Ayah’s raped and prostituted body, as it represents the paramount expression of abjection and corruption, from which society and its agents of power, figured in the microcosm of the family, need to be covered in order to perpetuate their core identity.

In her landmark work *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Judith Butler proposes a materialist approach to corporeality, which is entwined in the social regulatory practices that have traditionally controlled and demarcated the body. For her, “what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power’s most productive effect” (2). On the other hand, Foucault (1991) used the concept of governmentality to explain a transition in the aim and modes of governance from repressive sovereign power that was concerned solely with control over territory to a form of biopower and rule that is centrally

---

<sup>3</sup> There are two interesting studies of the recovering camps. Urvashi Butalia claims that these ashrams (monasteries) were set up for abducted women who were recovered and discarded by their families as they were considered to be ‘polluted’ and that these ashrams continued to house these women unclaimed and with nowhere to go as late as 1997, fifty years after independence and partition (107). Menon and Bhasin provide an outstanding extensive analysis of the ‘Recovery Operation’ as another form of communal exploitation of women’s sexuality in terms of national purity in “Abducted Women, the State and Questions of Honour.”

concerned with the welfare, care and security of the population living in a particular territory. Power is not simply disciplinary and productive (Foucault 1995), but also repressive and deductive (Foucault 1990). Foucault thinks of identity as a political construction anchored in power, with clearly delineated borders and boundaries, and mechanisms to check what or who is able to enter its domain. Therefore, in order to achieve national identity, societies tend to reject and contain abjection insofar as it threatens its symbolic order. In Kristevan theory, defiled and fuzzy elements, like in the case mutilated breasts, which in their normal state would be identified with lactation and the provision of nurturing milk, blur the limits of a normative society, displaying its fragility and corruption. The problem lies in the fact that the abject is always present more evidently in communal wars, so that it constantly jeopardises identity for individuals and nations.

## Conclusion

The nationalist discourse has produced a complex politics of corporeality by which ideologically, the female imaginary has served to articulate the abstract concept of the nation, but at the same time, the bodies of everyday women have been repeatedly constructed, controlled and disciplined by the agents of power. Ayah's and Hamida's bodies are marked sexually and ethnically, and in that process, othered. There is no doubt that the female body becomes a transitional object, a symbolizing site of intelligibility in the rhetoric of nationalism. Zaida and Zafar affirm that Sidhwa locates the communal violence on women's bodies, as they symbolize a territory upon which the battle for victory is contested, and more concretely Ayah's and Hamida's rapes signify the contest between the two communities which expel them, respectively as members of their own communities as they are automatically labelled as unchaste and impure (393). However, the fate of Aya is not ultimately condemned. Ayah is returned to her family and does not need to enter a recovering camp for fallen women. Therefore, the therapeutic speaking of the abject is carried out through the novel through the character of Ayah, an element of resistance. Ayah rejects Ice Candy Man when he seems to repent and follows her to the border where she is rescued, and what is traditionally considered a 'polluted body' is re-considered from a feminist strand. According to Chinkin, "the social stigma associated with rape renders a raped woman unmarriageable, deprived of respect in society and traumatised for the rest of her life. In some cases women become unacceptable even to their own families" (4-5), but Ayah is welcome by her family and rejects her imposed husband (her executioner) even though tradition defines it as a transgression which violates the taboo against the fallen woman. The familiar victim, the polluted woman, is now replaced by a female body which rejects a life of penance, in favour of the flesh reasserting of its primal authority. This grandeur could be interpreted as feminist struggle, as Sidhwa proposes a reversal of the prescription. This is a flagrant example of what Butler said about vulnerability and resistance: "If we also say that the vulnerability to dispossession, poverty, insecurity, and harm that constitutes a precarious position in the world itself leads to resistance, then it seems we reverse the sequence: we are first vulnerable and then overcome that vulnerability, at least provisionally, through acts of resistance" (2016: 12). Furthermore, according to Athanasiou, "mourning has desauthorizing effects in the national and gendered matrix of grief" (259). Ayah's end in the novel can be understood as an act of dismantling the apparatus of loyalty related to the politics of grievability and the discursive normativity that makes women-as-mothers stand for the idealized suffering of the nation.

However, we cannot forget that there are many Hamidas still seeking justice. Tabasum and Karim explain that fallen women are to pass through physical trauma, as they are raped and buggered brutally, and through psychological trauma, as the members of their families are never ready to accept them because they become a symbol of indignity and disgrace (241). The concept of spiritual and bodily healing remains at the heart of all social justice projects, as it addresses the necessity of recuperation and renewal after individual and collective trauma, in this case, resulting from the Partition of India in 1947. Healing may be brought about through specific policies of reconciliation, like the one carried out by

United Council for Relief and Welfare, the Central Recovery Operation, or the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, but closer attention must be paid to demand reparation for the injustice committed against these millions of women and their families, and we need to place it at the forefront of inter/national debates and in our classrooms, as it has been in the agenda of the feminist movements around South Asia since the eighties. Women being denied justice points to the limits within which women are placed in the formation of the nation-state. As Elizabeth Grosz points out in her *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*: “What are regarded as purely fixed and unchangeable elements of facticity, biologically given factors, are amenable to wide historical vicissitudes and transformations” (190). Thus, Sidhwa uncovers the culture/body dialectic in India through the story of ordinary villagers who register the rhetoric of avenging women’s dishonor that many men from both communities voiced at that time. Sidhwa seems to hope that the practice of reminiscing about mutual memories of the division of the subcontinent might make the older and newer generations, as Butalia suggests, “re-examin[e] the history of the partition” (276). Above all, it might encourage them to revive their ‘intertwined memories’ by exchanging lost bits of their ‘stories’ so that the growing gulf between quarrelling ethnic communities on both sides of the border could finally be bridged.

## References

- Athanasiou, A. (2016). Nonsovereign Agonism (or, Beyond Affirmation versus Vulnerability). In J. Butler, Z. Gambetti, L. Sabsay (Co-Eds.) *Vulnerability in Resistance*. (pp. 256-277). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Butalia, U. (2000). *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. London: Hurst and Company.
- Butler, J. (2016). Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance. In J. Butler, Z. Gambetti, L. Sabsay (Co-Eds.) *Vulnerability in Resistance*. (pp. 12-27). Durham: Duke University Press.
- . (1993). *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. London: Routledge.
- Chinkin, C. (1994) Rape and Sexual Abuse of Women in International Law. *European Journal of International Law*, 5 (1), 326-341.
- Das, V. (2007). *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- . (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, P. Miller (Co-Eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. (pp. 87-104). London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf.
- . (1990). *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1, An Introduction*. New York: Vintage.
- Grosz, E. (1994). *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jay, M. (1998). *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Martín-Lucas, B. (2013). The Beauties of Kashmir: Nila Gupta's Representations of War from a Distance. *Women: A Cultural Review*, 24 (1), 45-61.
- Menon, R. and K. Bhasin. (2000). *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- . (1996). Abducted Women, the State and Questions of Honour: Three Perspectives on the Recovery Operation of Post-Partition India. In K. Jayawardena and M. de Alwis (Co-Eds), *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia*,(pp. 1-31). New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Mohanram, R. (2016). Specters of Democracy/The Gender of Specters: Cultural Memory and the Indian Partition. In A. Singh, N. Iyer and R. K. Gairola (Co-Eds). *Revisiting India's Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture and Politics*. (pp. 3-20). Lenham: Lexington Books.
- Nandy, A. (1998). *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Pandey, B. (2004). A Paradigm Shift in the Representation of Violence in Partition Short Stories by Women: Political Irony in Shauna Singh Baldwin's 'Family Ties.' *The Atlantic Literary Review*, 5 (3-4), 105-112.
- Sarkar, T. (2002). Semiotics of Terror: Muslim Children and Women in Hindu Rashtra. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37 (28), 2872-2875.
- Roy, R. (2010). *South Asian Partition Fiction in English: From Khushwant Singh to Amitav Ghosh*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Scarry, E. (1985). *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sidhwa, B. (1991). *Cracking India*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.
- Tabasum, I. A. and A. Karim. (2013). Images of Hope in Ice Candy Man. *Kashmir Journal of Language Research* 16 (1), 237-247.
- Zaidi, N. A. and A. M. Zafar. (2013). Tradition Woman and Modernity in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novels. *European Journal of Scientific Research*, 102 (3), 388-396.