Chapter Four
Territorial Conceptualization: Woman and Nation in the Short Story of the Partition

‘Woman’ and ‘Nation’ form the two major thematic concepts in the Partition short stories written around 1947 and the following decade. Both are interlinked in more ways than one and defined as ‘territories’ in more than one sense too. ‘Woman’ can be ‘conquered’ like land or ‘territory’, can be ‘captured’ like a ‘Nation’, Nation is seen in ‘gendered’ terms, the identity of the woman and the Nation, intermingle and submerge within each other, ‘nations’ are seen in terms of territorial conceptualizations in the minds of characters of some of these stories and so are the women. My attempt in this chapter is to foreground this particular aspect of Partition and analyze its representation in some of the best stories of this period, written in Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi.

It is not surprising that the short story emerged as one of the important forms of the Partition narratives. The Short Story with its focus on individual history, with the individual belonging to the ranks of the ordinary, if not the subaltern, was the vehicle through which the small destinies of those destroyed by the big events of history, could be portrayed. There is an amazing variety of the story in the works of different writers. In the case of Manto, for instance, we find the creation of a new sub-type, the really short story (of even a couple of sentences)¹ where the shortness of the story is utilized to create the macabre-
paradox of the inhuman cruelties human beings unleash on one another. These small narratives are a modest but strong counterpoint to grand narratives of Indian Independence or of communal hate.

In fact the writer had to evolve a new strategy to confront the reality of the Partition. Human relationships were re-evaluated, values were re-examined and a new modern sensibility gave rise to ‘Nai Kahani’ (New Story) in Hindi and ‘Naya Afsana’ (New Tale) in Urdu around the same time i.e.1956. Partition, in fact, did not merely mean two new geographical dominions but it gave birth to a new psychic dominion as well.

The first story that exemplifies this dilemma of belonging to a particular ‘nation’ and yet not feel bound by its boundaries and allying oneself to the ‘conceptual’ nation is Ashfaq Ahmad’s [born 1925] ‘Gadariya’ [(Shepherd), Originally published in ‘Ujle Phool’, later in An Epic unwritten: The Penguin book of Partition stories from Urdu, ed. and trans. Mohammad Umar Memon, New Delhi: Penguin 1998] which was written in the backdrop of cultural harmony and even a shared religious concern prior to the eruption of the communal riots of 1947. The essentially tolerant community is reflected in the character of Dauji whose knowledge of Islamic religion, history and culture makes him identify with the Muslim culture even though he is very much a conscious Hindu. During the riots however, his ‘choti’ (tuft of hair on the tonsure), which stands for his Hindu identity, is clipped and he is made to read the ‘kalma’ (which of course he knows very well). But all his Islamic scholarship is of no help in the face of his own Hindu identity. His life long
commitment and learning may have diffused his own insulated Hindu self-consciousness but that ability to be tolerant towards and participate in the other’s religion become quite meaningless vis-à-vis the fanatically energized and crude proclamations of the rowdy rioters who were sifting the public into Hindus and Muslims. The story ends with the powerful image of Dauji having been condemned to become a shepherd ‘walking like a long-haired ghostly figure’ behind the herd of goats. In spite of his ‘conceptualization’ of his ‘nation’ as an amalgam of Hindu and Muslim cultures, he is forced to confront the ‘present’ somewhere in his consciousness and his psyche has to perceive and accept the separating line between the Hindus and the Muslims.

‘Toba Tek Singh’ by Saadat Hasan Manto [1912-1955] actually takes off from the point where ‘Gadariya’ ends. It is a story about arbitrary boundaries and borders that divide people, history and culture. For the millions who suffered the trauma of leaving their homes and properties, India and Pakistan were mere territorial abstractions. It has been pointed out again and again that never before in history was the fate of so many decided by so few and in such an arbitrary and thoughtless manner. The situation outside the lunatic asylum projects much more lunacy than the inside. When one of the lunatics climbing high up a tree is asked to come down, he says, “I don’t want to live in Hindustan or Pakistan. They mean nothing to me. I’m going to make my abode right here on this tree.” When he does come down, he cannot bear the thought of his Hindu and Sikh friends deserting him and going away to Hindustan.
‘Toba Tek Singh’ is also a story of dislocation and exile—exile from one’s natural home and habitat. Home is where one’s roots are, one’s past; one’s shared relationships, one’s memories and the presence of one’s ancestors, even if they are no longer alive. All this gives one a sense of identity. Even in their demented state, some lunatics have not lost their sense of place, which is manifested in the singular presence of Bishen Singh. Bishen Singh transforms into Toba Tek Singh, the person becomes the place where he was born and had his roots. They merge with each other, so much so that towards the end of the story, at least in the Urdu text, it is difficult to tell them apart.

Above all, Toba Tek Singh is about lunacy and madness. It is the madness of the sane which is doubly destructive than the madness of the insane. Bishen Singh is simultaneously living in two worlds—at one extreme is the no man’s land and at the other extreme is the lunatic asylum—both of them represent spaces where the individual is free from the restrictions of the normal world. In this way, this story questions the ‘notion’ of drawing ‘national’ boundaries and shows that the ‘nation’ is a place where one’s roots are and is not an arbitrarily decided piece of land.

Krishna Sobti’s (woman writer born 1925 writes in Hindi) story ‘Sikka Badal Gaya’ (Change of currency) was written in 1948 in Hindi and portrays the dilemma of the woman protagonist leaving behind the ancestral house, conceptualizing the idea of ‘her being’ ‘her space’ and ‘her nation’ in the symbol of the haveli, the ancestral house. The heroine Shahni wants to maintain the dignity of her Shahji’s house by stepping out of the door
respectfully and not in tears. The familial status and dignity of her ancestors was, she thought, in her custody. Having to migrate and leave this haveli meant a kind of betrayal of family trust bestowed upon her. From the ‘house’ into the refugee camp, she has to move—from the actual ‘space’ of her rootedness to the ‘conceptual territory’ of her nation, which is the refugee camp, Shahni’s journey is one of a change of realms.

A story, which effectively portrays the territorial conceptualization of the ‘nation’ during post-partition years, is Mohan Rakesh’s (Hindi playwright and short story writer) story ‘Malbe ka Malik’ (Lord of the Rubble). The story depicts Gani Mian’s visit to Amritsar seven and a half years after the partition and the replaying of the fate his family had met with during the Partition riots. Gani Mian’s visit to Bazar Bansa which had been a locality of the poor Muslims in the pre-partition times, seems to reignite the most ravaging fire which had destroyed the area in 1947. He goes there in search of his glorious past and his house. Manori shows him all that in its present state, in the form of the debris with broken and burnt bricks sticking out here and there in a heap of soil. Ironically, a half burnt frame of the door too sticks out of it as though inviting him to enter and pick out his memories from his own wreckage. The telltale debris of his house has been now in the ‘proprietorship’ of Rakha who had actually murdered Gani’s son Chirag, with an eye on his house. For all the Hindu-Muslim brotherhood and shared community life in the ‘mohalla’, (Neighbourhood) the ‘Rakhas’ with their self interest and greed had become barbaric in the name of religion.
The most ironic part of the story is where the author tells us that Rakha has regarded himself as the proprietor of that debris which even today, stood for the house itself and he clings to it. In his mind, Rakha’s ‘conceptualized’ ownership of his ‘territory’ and its representation in the form of the debris of the house is the kind of bitter irony, which prevails in the stories of the Partition.

Manto’s ‘Tetwal ka Kutta’; (The dog of Tetwal) is another story which depicts the irony of ‘territorial’ boundaries. The story is placed in a geographical area called ‘Tetwal’, now in Pakistan. The peaceful surroundings of this geographical locale contrast with the opposing warring groups, which are stationed here in the form of Army units. The soldiers on both sides live in similar conditions, share the same Punjabi cultural background, speak and behave identically. However, they are plagued with the notions of difference in the ideology of ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘we’ and the ‘enemy’, ‘this side and ‘that’ side; ‘Hindustan’ and ‘Pakistan’.

At one point in the story, a dog hunting for a stray morsel makes an appearance. The remark by one of the soldiers “now even the dogs will have to be Hindustani or Pakistani” shows that the logic of national boundaries seems to extend even to the most ordinary creatures of the animal kingdom too. Through the use of irony, in the way the dog’s identity is fixed by the opposing army units, Manto shows us the futility of the ‘conceptualization’ of nations. It is almost as if he is trying to identify all those people who have got their identities fixed as dogs; he is pointing at the ideology of the nation-state and its
totalizing effect on the individual. For with the fixation of citizenships, free movement in the two countries won’t be easy. The ‘territorial conceptualization’ of nations is complete and its effects are visible in the polarization of thoughts and deeds. The dog’s situation thus embodies the dilemma of all the people who faced such a closure of choices because of the Partition.

‘Thanda Gosht’, (Cold Meat) the story which Ahmad Nadeem Qasimi (Pen name of Ahmed Shah, born 1916, Urdu writer) considered ‘too hot’ for Nuqoosh² shows the transformation of human beings into beasts. Ishar Singh’s abysmal lust for wealth and bloodshed motivated him to join the frenzied mob that went on a killing spree. After murdering six members of a Muslim family and to finally quench his lust for sex, he carried off a young girl of the murdered family on his shoulders. The shocking discovery that he was going to copulate with a corpse gave him a rude jolt and rendered him impotent. Violence lies at the core of the story. Ishar Singh’s love making with Kulwant Kaur is as violent as his treatment of the Muslim family. Kulwant Kaur is equally violent in her expression of jealousy. However, for Manto, Ishar Singh’s impotence is symptomatic of his conscience which is still alive somewhere. Man retains some of his humanity even in the times of extreme bestiality.

In the story ‘Khol Do’, Sirajuddin asks eight volunteers at a refugee camp in Pakistan to find his daughter Sakina, from whom he has been separated during the chaotic journey from India. They trace her and as though
her trauma on this side of the border was not enough already, they, apparently, rape her repeatedly and then abandon her to her fate. She is brought to the doctor’s office in the camp. When the doctor says ‘open it’, (meaning the window), Sakina lying inert on the stretcher, opens her salwar involuntarily. She has been so brutalized and her relationship with language has become so tenuous that henceforth the phrase ‘Khol do’ will carry just one meaning for her to the exclusion of all others. The ending of the story stands as a telling epitaph to the death of civilized norms. The fact that Sakina’s immediate tormentors were, in all probability Muslims themselves adds another poignant dimension to the story. It underscores, as do all of Manto’s stories, the fact that, ‘the subject of the Partition was first the human being, not the Hindu human being, nor the Muslim, nor the Sikh. The experiences of each community distinctly mirror one another; indeed they reach out to and clutch at one another. No crime, no despair, no grief in exile belongs uniquely to anyone.’

Taken together, ‘Thanda Gosht’ and ‘Khol Do’ also highlight the fact that in times of violence and war, the female body becomes a contested site subject to assault and conquest.

What we see in Manto’s writings is a sense of questioning of the concept of the ‘Nation’ and whether it holds any meaning anymore. Through his stories, Manto is trying to conceptualize the idea of a ‘nation’ and its boundaries. According to his vision, divisions do not necessarily mean drifting apart. Politics is one thing and human solidarity is another. His wit and satire is directed at this new way of getting independence and he is definitely not
adhering to the rules anywhere. Human beings are free to belong anywhere, irrespective of their physical relocation. Manto's Nationhood has to do with the mind, and nowhere is it more explicitly portrayed as in his short stories.

Whenever there is a struggle for power and possession, the gender divisions, the double standards of society come to the fore. We see references to violence targeted against women in all literatures. It is believed that sexual violence during times of war and political disturbances reflect the tendency of cultures to make women feel ashamed of their bodies and sexuality, teaching men to disrespect it and to see women as objects of sexual targeting and this disrespect towards women is also a way of attacking the male sense of honour.

Partition was one such event, which sharply focuses on gender differences, behaviour and attitude. The short story written during the time is able to bring into focus the irony, the cruelty and the injustice of the moment. Moreover, the events during the partition were more a result of spontaneous and momentary hurt, a sense of aggression or a moment of avenging personal loss. There is no deliberation with this action. The temporary imbalance of mind and soul is best brought out in the short narrative.

In this entire scenario, one becomes conscious of the role accorded to women by the people, society and culture. They repeatedly become victims of human rage and all records of partition mention sexual violence or fear of it.

Rape, regarded as a manifestation of aggression against the victim, is also seen as an attempt to grind women and their men into submission. A patrilineal culture, like that of India is based on possessional rights.
Possessional rights while making the male, the possessor, the owner categorise the female as the ‘object’ of ‘possession’ and an assault is essentially a challenge to these possessional rights which the male relations—father, brother, husband—have over her.⁴

Violence against women and the threat of an assault is repeatedly mentioned in all literature dealing with the partition. As such the short stories provide the opportunity to study gender roles, both the accorded and the appropriated within a social system on the verge of a total collapse. Assault against women can be read both literally as the suppression and exploitation of the ‘other’ and also metaphorically as symbolic of the chaos of the times.

Women were the worst sufferers in those days of crisis. Men suffered in terms of death, material destruction and displacement. Theirs was a physical, mental and material suffering. But apart from deaths, their losses were not irreparable and were made up to a certain extent with the passage of time. But the women’s loss of dignity, self respect and individual esteem all inseparably aligned with sexual ‘purity’ could not be regained. The short stories dealing with the post-partition days relive the psychological trauma, the mental torture that they had to undergo. Among such stories, the most prominent are ‘Exile’ by Jamila Hashmi (Muslim woman writer, 1929-1988), Lajwanti by Rajinder Singh Bedi (Indian short story writer, 1915-1984, wrote in Punjabi) and ‘A leaf in the storm’ by Lalithambika Antharjanam (Indian woman writer, 1909-1987, wrote in Malayalam),
But throughout these writings, we find a complete objectification of the female. Whether she is something to be possessed, guarded, looted, assaulted or even rescued, she remains completely an 'object', the 'other'. In these stories, one doesn't find many choices being offered to the female. In all the three stories—'Exile', 'Lajwanti' and 'A leaf in the storm'—the women are raped and abducted during the Partition.

Jamila Hashmi's 'Exile' (From her collection 'Aap-Beeti Jag-Beeti) is a first person narrative of abduction, rape and marriage against the narrator's will. To emphasize the enormity of the situation, the narrator draws a parallel of Sita's story of abduction, consequent rejection and suffering. The woman was abducted and brought home as a bahu (Daughter-in-Law) after her abductor killed her family members. She was unceremoniously “dragged to Sangraon” (pg.63) after having witnessed her parents’ corpses. With her home destroyed, her people killed, she is forced into matrimony. The assault is complete. A marriage without love or consent tantamounts to rape, a sexual assault. She is acutely conscious of marital confinement, which has had such an ominous beginning:

No one had greeted me at the door of the house with a handful of rice and corn; or anointed my dust-covered hair with oil; or adorned me with jewels and fine clothes or put mehendi on my hands and sindoor in the parting of my hair. But I had become a bride. (pg.52)

Lalithambika Antharjanam’s ‘A leaf in the storm’ is one of the very few stories, which centers round a young girl who had actively participated in the nationalist movement. Her heroine Jyotirmoyi Devpal is brought up in perfect
happiness. She had college education and was influenced by nationalist fervour. She dutifully fought to uphold her ideals and suffered police brutality. A young girl, dedicated to the upliftment of women, Jyoti is herself reduced to a state of utter helplessness. Along with fourteen other women her generous Muslim friends conceal her in a bullock cart with bundles of hay. But escape is impossible and the women are discovered. The discovery causes “loud, thunderous laughter. Wild shouts.”(Pg.169)

The woman in Rajinder Singh Bedi’s *Lajwanti* (Taken from his collection of the same name) meets a similar fate. Moving around Lajwanti, it deals with the predicament of women who were victims of the brutality and rapacity of the rioters. It is a deeply moving account of the women who carry their sufferings beyond a particular time and space in history. Ironically, the title and the name ‘Lajwanti’ is drawn from a Punjabi folk song—“Do not touch Lajwanti/for she will curl up/ and die.” (pg.68) which recurs in the story like a refrain. It is mostly the woman who has to bear the yoke in times of social and human crises. She suffers because she is a vulnerable possession of the enemy and also because she represents the ‘other’ which the ‘self’ has to completely subdue in order to emphasize its own freedom.

In a stratified society at a time when divisions are being made the despoiling of women represents an attempt at despoiling an entire race. At a time when racial and religious purity is being emphasized, sexual assault can be read as an attempt to attack the genealogical purity of a race, caste or people as a whole.
For women, bound by the conservative power structure of the patrilineal society, the crisis continues endlessly. The gender roles in a patriarchal society run in a stereotypical manner.

The sexual temperament, role and status are clearly marked—aggression, force and efficacy in the male and passivity, ignorance, docility, virtue and ineffectuality in the female.

Interestingly, the female has to continue to work within the parameters laid by her role in a patriarchal system characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy and competition. Gentleness, preservation, nurturance, sensitivity, supportiveness, humility and unselfishness are categorized as ‘feminine’ psychological traits. So while the men are portrayed as aggressive and revengeful, women are once again seen as preservers of sanctity. They have to nurture the society back to a life of sanity.

Jamila Hashmi’s heroine takes on the burden of unselfishly working for her mother-in-law and husband nurturing her children. She has to be strong enough to forget the past and move her daughter away from its haunting shadows. It is significant that in her crisis she is not only victimized by her husband-violator but has to bear the indifference of her brothers who don’t come to her rescue.

The story contains two strands: the past that is, the narrator’s childhood, in which she remembers her family, especially her brother who left for England and never returned to rescue her, and the present, where she has become the unwed bahu of Gurpal, the mother of his three children and a domestic servant,
to be cursed and beaten by Gurpal’s mother. Her children, especially Munni, whom she is particularly fond of, ameliorate her sense of entrapment.

The pear tree has blossomed every year since Munni was born. When the season changes, its branches become filled with flowers, the tree bends over heavy with fruit, deepening its bond with the earth. Its roots burrow deeper into the soil. No one can rupture that bond. (88)

While she uses the image of a barren tree to portray her being, the narrator also points out the relationship between herself and her ‘rooted’ daughter, “Munni stands in my way. She is the great distance that separates me from my own family”(95)

It is an act of resistance that makes Hashmi’s narrator record her life history. The social compulsions that make Gurpal and his mother attempt to obliterate her ‘real’ identity (of an abducted, raped and kept woman) and substitute a ‘false’ identity (of a bahu) in its place are resisted by the narrator.

Lajwanti’s tale once again speaks of a woman being treated as a ‘devi’ (Goddess). A society emphasizing on female purity is unable to come to terms with the abduction and sexual despoiling of women. Women are exchanged in order to restore the social order. But the restoration is not an easy process. People are unable to accept these women with a stigmatized past. Rajinder Singh Bedi vividly presents the painful scene of exchange at the Wagah border (International border between India and Pakistan) where close relations refuse to accept the women inspite of their repeated pleadings. They cannot be indifferent to their social unacceptability. Religion, which supports and
encourages such killings, is completely opposed to the acceptance of these women. Guided by them and afraid of the social stigma, people refused to recognize their own daughters and wives. Bedi expresses his views differently, when he saw the relatives question their right to live:

Little did they understand the courage of their women, the awesome strength with which they had faced death, but had chosen to carry on living in such a world—a world in which even their husbands refused to acknowledge them. (Pg.72)

The gender bias, the strictly marked male and female roles, the overhype on female chastity and the social stigma attached to it are major obstacles in the rehabilitation of the women who have been the victims of male brutality. Conditioned by the society, Sunderlal, with his best intentions, cannot have a normal relationship with his wife Lajwanti. He goes to the other extreme and treats her as a Goddess. She ceases to be a human being with human emotions, fears and desires. Sunderlal has no wish to listen to her tale of sorrow, to be a part of the sufferings she had gone through. Her abduction and rape has also been an assault on his male ego. He is shocked to see her looking healthier than before, “her complexion looked clearer, her eyes brighter and she had put on weight” (pg.79) It is only the principles which he had been preaching to others that bind him and stop him from chastising her.

It is not love that guided his actions. This acceptance is a ‘manly’ duty reflecting his courage. Like Jamila Hashmi, Bedi also cannot avoid pointing out the parallel between Lajo’s situation and Sita’s return. He feels that the
scene of Lajo’s return is a “re-enactment of the old story about Ramchandra leading Sita back to Ayodhya (Capital of the Kingdom of Ram) after years of exile.” (pg.80) Lajo is no longer a woman, she has become an icon. Shunned by society and deified by her husband she yearns to return to a life of normalcy. Sunderlal “enshrined Lajo like a golden idol in the temple of his heart and guarded her like a jealous devotee.” (pg.80) She loses not only her identity but also her name, for now he calls her ‘devi’. She cannot share her sorrow of the ‘dark days’ with anyone. She helplessly realizes that her own body is alien and after the partition, “it is no longer her own body, but the body of a goddess.” (Pg.82)

She ultimately realizes that “she would never be Lajo again. She had returned home, but had lost everything. Sunderlal had neither the eyes to see her tears nor the ears to hear her sobs.” (Pg.82)

While the women in Hashmi’s ‘Exile’ and Bedi’s ‘Lajwanti’ are caught up in the crisis and play a completely passive role in a situation which offers no choices, the heroine in Antharjanam’s ‘A leaf in the storm’ does face a situation which forces her to make a choice. But tutored into a submissive role by society her choice is in keeping with the gender roles accorded by the social pattern.

She is full of anger and outrage against the humanity, which has made her a victim of its senselessness. Her hurt is deeper as she was among those who had hoped and fought for the new dawn, the independence. And ironically, when freedom did arrive it ruined her secure world and completely destroyed
her individual self. Like many, her faith in human sensibility is totally shattered. She is left without hope. In the refugee camp, she realizes that she is pregnant. She wishes to destroy “the seed of damnation” as it is “conceived in consequence of inhuman rape and ignorance.” (pg.164) She is stifled by the presence of life in her. She regards it as “everything womanhood and humanity found despicable in nature” (pg.166) She is not alone in her suffering. Women all around her continue to live even after the immense sorrow they are made to go through. But in times when death and chaos prevail over birth, it is up to the women to mark a new beginning. This is seen in Jyoti’s decision to preserve the child despite all odds. The sight of the innocent infant and the sound of its voice like “the assertion of a right, an appeal to nature” (pg.170) fill her with compassion and she yields to the responsibility of sustaining it.

In Jyoti’s decision, we can see a step towards liberation and woman exercising a choice. Pointedly, a female friend plans her escape and her companions are fourteen other women. The role of men is limited to the periphery of the story. Against all odds, the zest for life prevails upon her.

Mozel, the protagonist of Manto’s short story of the same name is a woman character from a community not directly involved in the Hindu-Muslim riots. As a westernized, bohemian Jew, living in Bombay at the time of Partition, she is critically distanced from the conflict. She ridicules Tirlochan’s rather hypocritical respect for Sikh religious markers, especially in the face of impending danger, when they attempt to rescue his trapped fiancée from a Muslim mohalla. A strong independent woman, Mozel refuses to be dominated
by any man, and all her relationships are short-lived, because she rejects all roles—that is as wife, mother or sister. She is a woman without ‘boundaries’ and is the symbol of a ‘free’ human being, a woman not defined by ‘territorial’ markers, but she too has to die in the traumatic times of partition.

Where as Lajwanti’s character shows the transformation of her husband’s attitude due to her ‘territorial abduction and return’ and her conceptualization as a ‘devi’, Hashmi’s narrator tells us her abduction and her consequent ‘territorial’ marker in the form of her new identity, Mozel depicts how this conceptualization cannot slot her as victim. Jyoti’s coming out of her trauma shows the emergence of a new concept of ‘woman’, not bound by territories.

In the words of Bodh Prakash:

> The critical point that needs to be emphasized is that the victimization of women pushes them into situations, which at one end of the spectrum can raise disturbing questions in their own consciousness regarding their identities as women, and at the other end, can significantly alter the balance of their relationship with men. Strategies of resistance to patriarchal exploitation vary, depending upon individual contexts. And not all women put up resistance. However, those who do, begin a journey towards a self-definition that attempts to shed generations of patriarchal orientation. They become aware of their own selves as women and as victims. The exercise of their agency results in the creation of a new female self. 

The Partition changed for millions of people the very idea of home. People who had never been out of their insulated villages for generations were suddenly forced to choose a country, and this also changed for them the idea of
a nation. Perhaps for many, Nationhood became a conscious fact. Only because of the partition, when friends became foes because they were of the other community and compelled them to flee to a land far away.

Mention must be made of the writers belonging to the East, who also wrote about this tragedy of division, discord and uprooting in the 1940’s. The Punjab partition was seen as a national crisis when millions of people crossed the border or were transferred with govt. aid to camps.

In contrast the Bengal partition did not begin with a mass exodus. In the months following the Partition, the people continued to slowly move in till many decades after that. There are several reasons for it. Thousands of artisans and craftsmen who came over to West Bengal in the wake of the upper class Hindus who had traditionally been their employers. East Bengal was deteriorating economically; and the high prices of food grains made people cross over. There were frequent communal clashes between the two communities and the Hindus found that they could no longer trust anyone in East Pakistan and call it their home. The Noakhali riots in 1946 and other communal upheavals of 1950 resulted in a long stream of refugees. By the first year after Partition 1.25 million people had crossed over to West Bengal, Assam and Tripura. In the half century after Independence, the number has reached five million.7

Given the differences in the two Partitions that had taken place in the west and the east and the unequal hold they have in our collective memory, it was not surprising to discover that ‘accounts of partition have tended to be
Punjab-centered and Bengal has not received the attention it deserves. However, recent publications have tried to rectify this and addressed this silence regarding the partition in the East. The writers of short stories (translated into English) are from Bangladesh and India and their stories give us some idea of the range of narrative available in Bangla—indirect, ironical stories, subtly submerging the horror and terror under the daily lives of ordinary people. We see these writers exploring some of the significant themes of the partition—the fragility of borders in the construction of identities and also the frequent disruptions of memory. At the same time, these stories destabilize the settled discourse of nationhood that focuses on the moment of its birth and that is defined by manmade borders. The stories also question the finality and the resolution of Partition.

Before the Partition, the daily lives of the people were richly interwoven although differences existed in the two communities. Common customs and practices gave a sense of living together in harmony. Therefore, in the wake of Partition, the response both in Punjab and Bengal had been confusion—an inability to understand the horror of it all. Partition is seen as a moment of pain, madness, a physical mutilation and most narratives from Punjab focus on the physical aspect of the carnage—the body becoming a metaphor of the divided land.

On the other side, in Bengal, the closeness of the two communities was also a fact of language (Urdu was spoken only by the elite Muslims and never fully accepted by the masses which spoke Bangla). The closeness of ‘epar’
Bangla and ‘opar’ Bangla (of this Bengal and that) was manifested in the rivers, the language, the ties of clan and memory, customs and rituals and the identity of the Bengalis, whether Hindus or Muslims, rested on these factors rather than on religion.

Hence in Bengali literature, partition is often seen in psychological terms—the hurt is not in the body but in the mind, the soul. Bangla stories have a predominant tone of nostalgia, it is the loss of a ‘world’, and hence these stories from the two Bengals are less violent, less pathological than the narratives from the West. Another major difference between the narratives of the East and the West lies in their treatment of time. Many of the stories from Bengal, treat partition not as time ‘past’ but also as time present. For these people, Partition did not end at 1947, but continued in time and that is reflected in the indirect references to the event. The Partition features indirectly in these narratives through the lives and experiences of the refugees. Their daily fight for existence, their pain and loss are in a large way a comment on the Partition.

Some of the Bangla stories are set in the years 1946-48, when families left their homes, trudged through hostile territories to reach, starving and half-dead, another uncertainty—the life of a refugee. The Sealdah station in Calcutta became the home for millions of people arriving from East Bengal and the insecurity of that life is captured in the stories by Pratibha Basu and Manik Bandhopadhyay viz. ‘Dukulhara’ (Flotsam and Jetsam) and The Final Solution respectively. The Partition also meant that people had a mutual exchange of properties and that is portrayed in Dibyendu Palit’s story. Some of the stories
vividly portray the horror of flight, of desperate attempts by ordinary people to save human lives e.g. Selina Hossain’s *Gayatri-Sandhya* [*An evening of Prayer*] and Ateen Bandhopadhyay’s *Kafer* [*The Infidel*]. Syed Waliullah’s story is a sad commentary on the helplessness of ordinary people who are faced with a terrible event and are shocked by its magnitude.

In a story by Narendranath Mitra, *Jaiba* (the biological), a Hindu woman raped just before the Partition is not allowed to abort because her scientifically minded husband makes a guinea pig of the baby to study the impact of environment during conception on the formation of the child’s personality. The bourgeois freedom that the woman is supposed to enjoy in the newly liberated India turns into a nightmare for her—raped, restored and then made an object of a scientific experiment.

Looking at Partition from a feminist perspective, we see that there exists a deep collusion between the community at one end and the nation on the other. Moral regulation or rather a hypocritical obsession with women’s sexual purity marks the patriarchal foundation of the hegemonic class in India. A woman’s body is a pawn even in the game of nation building. Defilement of communal honour through the violation of female sexuality is a thesis that resonates through the entire process of our nation building. The riot victims are hit twice by patriarchy: first by the male of one community who establishes his own ‘identity’ by exercising his territoriality over her body, second by her ‘own’ community which involves compulsions of ritual purity to exclude her from the ritually pure domains of hearth and marriage.
In a much acclaimed book by Partha Chatterji, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 'community' and 'women' are presented as two fragments of the Nation. At the moment of the birth of two nation-states in the place of one colonial state, the bodies of countless women are brought under the control of their respective communities to complete the grand act of vivisection.

Thus, what we see in these short stories of Partition is the way the 'nation' and its 'women' have been conceptualized in territorial terms. Both are seen, analyzed and slotted similarly in 'territorial' terms, subverting their powers of resistance and invoking strong feelings against such proprietary attitudes, stemming from patriarchal structures and communalistic ethos. Partition identified 'the nation' and 'the woman' as conceptualized territories—to be conquered, inscribed and exploited and nowhere is this more evident than in the stories of the time.
Notes


2 Manto, pg.110

3 Jason Francisco, 'In the heat of fratricide: The Literature of India's Partition burning freshly', *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No.11, 1996, pg.250

4 A definite relation between the patriarchal system and violence against women is traced by Madhu Kumari in 'Patriarchy and Violence against women in India'; *Women and Violence, Seminar* (New Delhi, 1994) pg 142-63

5 Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*; (London: Routledge, 1970)


8 Tai Yong Tan & Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*; (London: Routledge, 2000) pg.141
