CHAPTER-IV
THE PRAXIS OF RAPE IN WAR AND CONFLICT

Rape is dislocated from the private sphere when we look at its occurrence in a conflict situation. Instead of being an incident of assault on an individual’s honour, or family honour, it becomes an issue concerning the country or state’s/community’s honour. In war/conflict situations such as the Partition of India, literature depicts it being used as a weapon to settle scores between two nations.\(^1\) Women’s bodies are appropriated and are no more their own. They are treated as consanguineous with the land, possessions or chattel. Perhaps, because a nation or community’s honour is at stake in the form of the woman’s body, the site of the female body becomes sacrosanct as it gets entangled with issues of nationhood or community allegiance.\(^2\)

In conflict situations, as in most nationalist struggles, women are treated as symbolic subjects. Hence, we see that in most Indo-Pak Partition narratives, they are treated as symbols of the community’s honour and not as individuals. Thus a kind of “gender symbolim” that suspends women’s individuality prevails in the Partition narratives.\(^3\) Sudhir Kakar has rightly observed that in times of violence and strife the identification with one’s community outweighs other identifications.\(^4\) This explains the mob mentality at work in situations of Partition/War.

Partition scholars of India such as Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon etc. have highlighted the silence and agony in the narratives of violence.\(^5\) We see in most literature dealing with conflict how in this dislocation syndrome men become savages and the streak of violence targets one and
all. In this circumstance the most vulnerable possession is the other man’s woman. This makes each community jittery yet this does not discourage them from unleashing aggression on the other. In fact, since a crime like rape does not require much valour, it becomes rampant. Women & children are seen as the most vulnerable targets and as a result become victims of warfare. Dislocation thus directly impacts women in terms, both physical and psychological. They become the victims of the predatory masculinity of men. Rape and sexual assault are looked upon as accessible weapons. Rape warfare as argued by many critics (Beverly Ellen etc.) becomes a popularly used strategy, whether it is a Bosnia, Iraq or Gaddafi’s Libya. Recently in April 2011, reports of Libyan forces using rape as a weapon against women an children to answer rebels, shocked us with the primitivism, still rampant. What is more, the forces are boosted with Viagra to boost their libido. Harrowing tales of children as young as eight years old being raped are the worst. Thus, the paradigm of rape acquires a different meaning in a conflict situation or war. It becomes a part of warfare. It is neither incidental, nor motivated by any personal vendetta. According to the Human Rights Watch Global Report on Women’s Human Rights (1998), rape is used systematically to punish, coerce and degrade the antagonists. Mass rapes of women and gangrapes prove that it is not a weapon used to settle individual scores but that of a community or a group against another. Rape thus becomes a weapon used in war and such warfare may be termed rape warfare. Narratives based on events that took place during the Partition of India are a case in point. In a land where women’s sexuality has been channelized and forever diluted through the institution of marriage, it is no wonder that during the Partition, women’s bodies were used by each
nation to avenge itself. The denial of identity to women is illustrated best in the dislocation narrative where the assault on women was perceived as an assault on “manhood” and “nationalism” (Urvashi Butalia The Other Side of Violence, 141).

Violence against women besides being a deprivation of a woman’s biological rights is a violation of human rights as well. As human beings, each individual has a right to live free of torture. However, besides the violation of bodily rights we see the violation of human rights in such crimes of rape as witnessed during the Partition of India. Sa’adat Hasan Manto’s short stories are a terse discourse that encapsulates the madness & aggression of both the Hindu and Muslim communities in times of Partition. In her study, Jyoti Puri analyzes middle –class women’s narratives about experiences of sexual aggression. Women tell narratives about ways in which sexual aggression helps crystallize their consciousness of their bodies.9

In the Partition narratives too we notice that instances of aggression against the female body accentuate in women the self-consciousness of embodiment. The question of how unsafe women can be even with their saviours is raised by Manto in ‘Open It’.10 Siraj –ud-din, an old man seeks help from some volunteers in a refugee camp in Pakistan. Old Siraj-ud-din does not realize how his daughter Sakina has been brutally gang-raped by the very men he trusted to bring her home in the strife –torn border. She is discovered and brought to the doctor’s tent for treatment. It is significant that Sakina is referred to as a corpse and the only words she responds to are the words her ears have now become accustomed to hear: “Khol do” (Open it). While the ill-fated father picks up her dupatta in an
attempt to salvage her honour, little does he realize its futility. The doctor who is drenched in cold sweat knows what Sakina has been through. In response to his order to Siraj-u-din to open the window, Sakina who has been brutally raped repeatedly, loosens the tape of her salwar. The semi-conscious girl, lowers her pajama to open her legs, as the doctor and her father watch in consternation. The narrative reveals that even in a state of unconsciousness (she is described as a corpse), her awareness of her body awakens her and the habitual, insensitive brutalization that she has internalized, brings her back to momentary consciousness. Manto, thus poignantly illustrates the identification of the brutalized Sakina with her body. Thus Manto’s stories become the non-historical chronicles of Partition memories that are indelible.

The ruthlessness of communal rage and vendetta that treats women’s bodies as cultural objects that can be appropriated is summed up in Manto’s brief poem translated from Urdu by Alok Bhalla:

“Please don’t kill
My young daughter
Before my eyes…”

“Alright, let’s do as he says…
Strip her
And drag her away…”¹¹

Manto’s other story that recounts the horror of Partition is ‘Thanda Gosht’ (Cold Meat).¹² The protagonist Ishwar Singh (who is ironically named) is portrayed as a macho man who refers to his sexual powers as the “trump card” (CM, 93). On being confronted by his mistress Kulwant
Kaur’s questions about his recent strange behaviour, he fumbles for answers. She recounts how he had laden her with gold jewellery he had looted during the riots but had strangely abandoned her in a sudden, unexplained manner. He is a transformed and distracted man, badgered by Kulwant’s persistent questioning and suspicion of “bitch who has sucked” him dry (CM, 94). He is confident that he will be able to convince her by demonstrating his sexual prowess. However, memories and the recall of the horrifying incident leave him in a cold sweat. He reveals to an agitated Kulwant, after she has already attacked him with his own dagger what happened that night. During the looting that was taking place during the riots he recounted how he had looted a family of seven people and killed six of them with his dagger. He revealed to her horror, the secret he had kept from her. The only woman who was a beautiful girl was abducted by him. The temptation to relish her, he could not avoid. As he sums up the gruesome act he recalls how he threw his trump card only to realize that “she … was dead… a lifeless corpse… a cold, lifeless corpse… “ (CM, 96). The shocking bestiality and the aftermath summarize the human acts of violence that were perpetrated during the Partition of India and Pakistan.

Even before, Ishwar Singh could tell all, Kulwant had stabbed him in a fit of jealousy and Ishwar Singh rightly summed up in his incomplete utterance the justice when he tells her that she “has acted in haste. But what you did was just”. The “cold meat” then stands for both the raped, dead corpse of the woman who preferred to annihilate herself to save her honour. At the same time it refers to the “cold meat” Ishwar Singh ends up as. Ishwar has aptly summed up that “Man is a strange mother-fucking creature” (CM, 95) deriving from his own treatment of women in this
manner. Manto’s stories are a stark reminder of the horror and appalling apathy of humanity to the fate of women in a conflict situation.

Jamila Hashmi’s *Exile*, another Urdu story about Partition, uses the title-word to freeze in it the discomfiture and suffering of the victim of abduction and rape. The story opens with the celebration of Dussera in the northern region (Sangraon) of India in a Sikh community. The nameless protagonist who is only referred to as Bibi in the story ‘*Exile*’ traces the analogy between the abduction and exile of Sita by Ravana to hers. Strangely women of two different communities (Muslim & Hindu) seem to have the same tale to tell and see their life’s similarity.

The consciousness that “exile” is terrible but needs to be endured seems to have sunk into ‘Bibi’, the protagonist. She sees other similarities between her narrative and that of Sita. Just as Sita had the wish to be granted a meeting with Ramchandra, she has the wish to meet her brother and sister-in-law from across the border, even though she has been rejected by them. The tragic unsung tale of woe about abducted women in the strife-torn Indo-Pak border is recalled here: “Many wives were brought to Sangraon during those days. No one had greeted them with music. No one had beaten the drums or sung lusty songs …” (E, 40). The story seems to hint at similarity in the treatment meted out to these women and to animals (E, 41). In any case, Gurpal, the husband who has abducted her declares to his mother that “she will be your slave” (E, 40). The visit to the Dusherra fair raises several question in the mind of Bibi, who still feels the pinch of being uprooted and hurt. She wonders about a similar fate “can those who are lost in a fair, ever be found again?” (E, 41). The fact of separation stands like a wall between people who have
been separated: is the realization Bibi has gathered. Even after having been owned by this Sikh family, she feels a great barrier exists between them as she is conscious of their being different and poles apart: “My two sons stood beside him” (E, 42). Such a forced union, the abduction and conquest of a woman’s body and self, can only result in such a consciousness of their separate identities.

Bibi recalls the parting of her brother who proceeded on a voyage to Paris and was seen-off with great love and affection and contrasts it with her own parting which was so unceremonious and without love. When Gurpal promises to tell his sons the story of Ravana while on his way back from the fair, his wife is compelled to again refer to the analogy between her and Sita: “He didn’t realize that Sita was following him and that he himself was Ravana” (E, 43). Strangely enough, she is now treated as the respected daughter-in-law by the family and is metamorphosed into the goddess “Lakshmi” (E, 44). Yet the consciousness of stigma compels her to concede that: “the page on which my life story has been written, is so smudged with black ink that it is difficult to find a single straight line on it”. (E, 44). She finds it difficult to forget all despite being a mother of three in a household where she is now even respected. She metaphorically sums up the anguish of force having been used upon her: “The wind swept over the tender plants and bent them to the ground. When the wind blows everyone has to bend…” (E, 45).

Jamila Hashmi reveals how difficult it is to sever the past from the present specially after having experienced trauma. Probing the mind of her protagonist, who believed that the past- the “memories would vanish
like dreams, crumble into dust” (E, 46), she realizes that her “memories are like the photograph on the walls, shadows of reality” (E, 46). Bibi often wonders at the transformation of people from “those who had once been ready to die for their mothers and sisters, now began to play cruel games with the honour of women” (E, 48). She constantly recalls the Partition and its harrowing aftermath. She has witnessed her father and mother being killed besides what happened to her. She confesses to having put up with “Badi Ma’s beatings and Gurpal’s abuses” (E, 49) in the hope of uniting with her own brother and sister-in-law, who never ever tried to reach out to her. She recalled with gory sarcasm that even if, her wedding was not the ideal one, “Gurpal had after all spread a carpet of corpses for me. He had painted the road red with blood and illuminated it by setting villages on fire” (E, 50). Bibi has however, now accepted the reality, has realized that she is a victim who has suffered twice. Once, by her abduction and forced union with Gurpal and again in her rejection by her own blood, her brother. With this realization and agony she knows that life has to go on. She follows Gurpal into Sangraon after the Dusshera fair as she knows that she cannot go “into exile for a second time, it seemed as if Sita has accepted Ravana’s home” (E, 52).

Jamila Hashmi’s poignant story raises numerous questions regarding the stigma associated with women who are abducted, raped or brutally treated in strife-torn conflict zones. If on the one hand there is the inhuman treatment meted out to them by the other community on the other hand is the rejection by their own community. The double-bind and double-exile of such women are horrifying narratives of rejection and loneliness. The learning of despair and submission to the “darkness” of oblivion are the lot of such women and the ‘exile’ suitably sums up the
two exiles such women suffer (E, 52). The unending “journey” that life becomes for such women is the appropriate metaphor for pain (E, 52).

However, the protagonist’s will to trash the memories of the past and to move on with the flow of life, suggests a positive change. The transformed attitude of the victim light hope and suggests the revolutionary transformation of minds that is desirable to rehabilitate such victims. The positive attitude of the protagonist who looks to the future of her children in defiance of the patriarchal alternative of honour killing of one self, reminds one of Amrita Pritam’s *Pinjar* that treats the theme of an alternative way of looking at rape and abduction.\(^{14}\)

Rajinder Singh Bedi’s Urdu story *Lajwanti*, like Jamila Hashmi’s *Exile* is the narration of the dilemma of the post-trauma survivors and society’s inability to accept them into the mainfold.\(^{15}\) Lajwanti, whose name means the chaste one as well as the delicate one like the flower of the name, is a survivor of rape. She had been abducted and raped by Muslims. Thus, the situation in this story inverts the one in Jamila Hashmi’s *Exile*. While there, the Indian community (Sikhs, Hindus) are depicted as predators, in Lajwanti’s case it is the Muslim community that is delineated as the barbaric one. The writers who have painted pictures of the Partition wish to suggest that neither community is civil. They are equally savage and the writers endorse neither of them and reinforce the notion of their savagery. The story begins with the statement that “the carnage of the Partition was at last over” (L, 55)). This, however, implies that the horror and aftermath was not yet over. Thus, ‘rehabilitation’ becomes a major concern and its actual absence continues to haunt writers who historicize this period. The story exposes the reality behind
“the programme for rehabilitation of women who had been abducted and raped” (L, 55). Though its slogan aims at restoring their honour. Sunderlal, who is the secretary of the programme at Mohalla Shakoor, is a “delicated worker. His own Laj had been abducted. He had dedicated himself to the service of such women. He believed that they were “delicate like the lajwanti plant” (L, 56). Lajwanti is a simple village girl who is subjected to the routine thrashings of Sunderlal, but after her abduction, a sudden metamorphosis makes him kind to such women. He considers abducted women “victims of the brutality and rapacity of the rioters” (L, 57). Lajo’s fate is that of the battered wife and then a victim of abduction. The story neatly questions the zeal of people like Sunderlal who believe in rehabilitation of such women but end up doing mere lip-service to the cause. His dedication to the Committee for the Rehabilitation of women is genuine but the story emphasizes the need for whole-hearted acceptance of such women. The exchange of abducted women between India and Pakistan is more like a chattel fair where women are treated as goods. “They treated women like cows in a cattle-fair” (L, 63).

Lajo’s return, dressed like a Muslim woman, who is hale and hearty leaves Sunderlal shocked. Once again, we observe that yet another Partition story reverts for an analogy to the scriptures, and as in Jamila Hashmi’s Exile, the protagonist and her suffering draw a parallel to that of Sita’s. The question whether a victim should be treated, as guilty is raised again: “Is it a question of Sita’s truthfulness, faithfulness or Ravana’s wickedness” (L, 63). Confronting his wife who had been abducted and raped was very disturbing. He ceased, to address her as ‘Lajo’ and calls her “Devi” (L, 65). This deification of such victims of
rape, is like a strategy to distance oneself from the victim as well as reality. While he convinces her that she should not feel “dishonoured” but when Lajo looks at her body there is a poignant recognition that “since the Partition, it was no longer her own body, but the body of a goddess” (L, 66). The paradoxical knowledge that she had “returned home’ but had “lost everything” (L, 66), sums up the fate of numerous women like her. The dislocation narrative then fully explores the multiple layers of women’s lives that are affected due to the Partition. Lajwanti yearns to be “Lajo” again but ironically is transformed and pedestallized by Sunderlal like a goddess. This surely is his strategy to distance himself from her. The irony of Lajwanti’s slow death due to being treated like an untouchable is reiterated by the paradoxical hymn the procession sings – “Do not touch lajwanti for she will curl up / and die” (a Punjabi folk song L, 55).

S.H. Vatsayan ‘Ajneya’

S.H. Vatsayan ‘Ajneya’s story, ‘Getting Even’ translated from Hindi, tries to catch the spirit and the atmosphere of suspicion that prevailed amongst people of the Hindu and Muslim community in the turbulent period of Partition.16 The narrative is about an incident during an itinerary on a train. The train which is described by Alok Bhalla as the “liminal space” (Intro. xxii), is like a metaphor for the situation of flux and transit that were the aftermath of Partition.17 Suraiya, a young Muslim lady, travelling with her two children is terrified at the prospects that awaits her on this train to Aligarh that she has boarded. She eyes suspiciously the Sikh father and son who are already in the compartment. Suraiya’s fears multiply as two Hindus enter the compartment. She fears the worst, lies to the Sikh man while keeping an eye on the alarm chain. The smug Hindus have nothing to fear ad with their tales of horror and
happenings around, try to terrify both the Sikh men and the Muslim lady. When he is referred to as a refugee and reminded of how their community had been treated, the Sikh man refuses to be baited. In order to instigate and terrorize the woman, the Hindu speaks of how “right in front of their fathers and brothers young girls were stripped naked and…” (GE, 122). In fact the Sikh man feels embarrassed and apologizes to the lady for having to hear such unkind things. He confesses, “a woman’s dishonour is a matter of shame for all men.” (GE, 122). He even lies that the Muslim lady is his sister and that he is escorting her to Aligarh. His whole family had been wiped out by Muslims but as a refugee, he is the one who offers kind, reassuring words to the Muslim lady on this train journey in such trying times. As a refugee, he had adopted the “liminal space” of the train in the absence of any home and now escorts people between Delhi and Aligarh. He knows that “a woman’s dishonour is a woman’s dishonour – it is not a Hindu’s shame or a Muslims shame” (GE, 124) and so he has decided that what happened to his family will never be repeated. He has chosen another way of “getting even” – what befell his family and women should never befall other women. The story treats the turbulent back-drop of Partition in a novel manner by emphasizing the bond of humanity that binds two communities that share a common disturbed heritage. The message that there are alternative ways to “get even” (GE, 124) reflects the maturity with which a writer like Ajneya treats the same theme. While the story only reports the fate of what befell Sardarji’s family, it represents the anxiety and fear that women during Partition must have lived through. While in transit, they fear the worst and are reminded of the fate of many train victims on other occasions. Thus, the potential threat that the other community and gender posed to women,
becomes the theme of this moving story.

Lalithambika Antharjanam’s (1909-88) story ‘A Leaf in the Storm’ has as its protagonist Jyoti who is brought to a rehabilitation camp in post-Partition times.\textsuperscript{18} She was “the most emaciated of the women reclaimed from the obscure village in western Punjab and the most outraged of them all, too (LS, 136). A pregnant and unmarried woman, who was pretty and well-educated, who was herself a feminist of sorts. She had fought the ‘purdah’ and acquired college education. She recalls through her hazy memories how she had loved her “freedom” (LS, 143). Ironically, now she was one of the fifty girls / women given against the fifty reclaimed by the two countries. These women seem to have lost their identities at the hands of war-crimes: they were “like ghosts let loose from the sepulchers” (LS, 137).

Lalithambika, who addressed gender issues and was ahead of her times, could see the conflicts that must have occupied such brutalized women. This story too traces the pain, agony, self-loathing and anxieties of a woman towards her body and the unborn child born through such forced unions as the Partition had ironically brought into being. Jyoti who had been of “a self-assertive nature” and had “independent ways (as her reveries reinforce), was now crumbling. She felt revulsion and the unborn baby was like “a challenge to every cell of her being” (LS, 140). She finds herself “despicable” (LS, 141). The narrative traces her vacillation between the choices available to her. She contemplates the alternative of aborting the child when she confronts the lifeless body of a newborn and deserted child. She knows that “at midnight she could wipe herself clean of her filth and come out –into a new world of hopes…” (LS, 141). The
trauma of being a Partition survivor is unbearable as it is. The scenes in
the camp are poignant with people recalling those harrowing times when
they had been “hounded” out of their homes. The simile of stray dogs
hunting out wild hens is used to sum up the aggression they had
witnessed. In their vengeful rage people in the camps would even curse
the “grandsire of Indian politics” who was himself a symbol of non-
violence (LS, 141).

Jyoti’s dilemma is not just that of erasing memories it is also about
mothering an unwanted child. She had heard people preaching at the
camp that abducted women should be accepted by society. In the criss-
cross of memories and anxieties, Jyoti recalls how she had been dragged
out of Qasim Sahib’s cart and then taken to the prison, where many men
vent their “fanatic hate and frenzy” (LS, 144) on vulnerable women like
her. On the one hand the memories of her own torture, seem to exhort her
to choke the child to death, on the other the temptation to abandon the
child. The memories of her own happy childhood and how she had been
given love and affection by her parents motivate her to guard the child
like “a leaf in the storm” (LS, 145). She knows that it was “difficult to
sever life’s bonds so easily” (LS, 145). The motherly instinct in her wins
over the destructive force of rage and revenge. She had “resolved a
complicated puzzle” after having become “the mother” (LS, 145). The
story is revolutionary in its suggestion of a positive possibility. The
stigma of rape and abduction should not come in the way of such victims
is amply illustrated by this story. Jyoti herself is like a “leaf in the storm”
the title refers to but she transforms herself into the saviour who protects
the vulnerable child against her own temptations. Having agonized over
the choices available to her, she decides that ” One must carry one’s cross
oneself” (LS, 144). While a vein in the Partition stories (as depicted in *Tamas*) is that of women annihilating their identity for her sake of their community’s honour, the more positive one, that of women braving to live on is represented in stories like these. Thus, we see a shift in terms of representation of women in the Partition narrative being just descriptive. Gradually, we see writers turning to prescriptive paradigms like this one, which vindicate life over death; positive over negative choices. ¹⁸

Another insightful work about the Partition and its violent impact on women is the Bengali writer Jyotirmoyee Devi’s *The River Churning* (Epar Ganga Opar Ganga), a Partition novel penned in 1967. ¹⁹ The novel was originally published as *Itihasey Streeparva* (The Woman Chapter in History) but was later renamed. The narrative elaborates the experiences of Sutara Dutta, a Hindu Bengali girl a resident of Hatkhola, Noahkhali that witnessed the worst kind of violence during the Partition of India and Pakistan. The blood bath of 1946-47 is likened by Jyotirmoyee Devi to the holocaust and the battle of Kurukshetra in the *Mahabharata*. She highlights how the patriarchal institution of War blemishes and traumatizes the lives of women, compelling them to lament as in the *Stree Parva* of the *Mahabharata*. However, in the authorial note it is suggested that the tragedy of the Partition is closer to the destruction of the ‘Mushal Parva’ of the *Mahabharata* which was one of the most destructive chapters of history that chronicled the suicidal conflict of the Yadava clan and their end. The aftermath in which women were abducted and lawlessness that Arjuna too witnessed, are analogical to the holocaust post-partition. The trauma that women must have undergone requires a woman epic-poet but unfortunately there are none to narrate “the stories of their own dishonour and shame” (EGOG, xxxv). The unsung saga of
the victimization of women behind the tales of bravery, the paradox of Independence which was consanguineous with the Partition, are the theme taken up by this path-breaking and revolutionary work. The author regretfully observes “No history has recorded that tragic chapter of shame and humiliation …” (EGOG xxxv).

In fact, Jyotirmoyee Devi’s insinuation is obvious. History has always represented only half the picture. The silence in history about the lives of the weak and poor, inspires the protagonist of the novel to quote Rabindranath Tagore’s lines:

Stop your long narrative and endless tales
You spinner of falsehood. (EGOG, 3).

History has always been a partial narrative and its selective nature suggests that it has been elusive and is guilty of having suppressed the narratives of women. It is this silence that inspires the writer to draw an analogy to the Mahabharata, the celebrated epic of Indian culture. The three sections of the novel are therefore named after three chapters of the Mahabharata:

Stree Parva – the eleventh book - the book of lamentations.20

The shuffling of the order of the books suggests the emphasis of the novel. The novel focuses on the double-bind in the life of Sutara Datta, who is a post-partition survivor, has witnessed her father’s killing, mother’s suicide by jumping into a pond, possibly her sister’s abduction and rape along with her own. The ‘Adi Parva’ – first section of the novel
strangely does not elaborate the much-described violence. This suggests the focus of the work which is the trauma and difficulty in rehabilitation of such victims of violence who were doubly wounded first in the communal acts of violence and then in the ostracism they faced from their own communities. Sutara is saved with great difficulty and great risk to themselves by Tamijuddin Kaka’s family. The kindness and affection shown by this family reveals how the suspicion and hatred for each other’s community was baseless.

Just as the ‘Adi Parva’ of the Mahabharata introduces us to the various characters and families, here too we are initiated into a gory introduction to the happenings: Gopal Babu had been stabbed and dumped in a ditch, Sujatadi too went missing and Jataima jumped into the pond; Durga had hung herself… Alaka had jumped into the river and Surama’s family home was set ablaze (EGOG, 13). The Great Calcutta Killings (massacres of Muslims) and Gandhiji’s arrival with the message of peace, are all snapshots of the period. The futility of all efforts to bring peace is summed up as a response to Gandhiji’s appeal that work must continue to bring communal harmony: “Work? What work? What was done could not be undone” (EGOG, 14). The introductory chapter reveals the anxiety of a hopeless and helpless Sutara and the lack of concern of her brothers. Even Sakina’s family can see that “the brothers were more concerned about their good name, the honour of the family, than they were about Sutara” (EGOG, 23).

The second section of the novel “Anusasan Parva: The Imposition” narrates the sufferings of a survivor who is looked upon as “polluted” (EGOG, 31). The feeling of being treated “like an outsider” saturates her
stay, with the joint family of her brother. As Amulya Babu, her brother’s father-in-law sympathetically sums up, “Sutara seemed like the bloody symbol for the mother figure we call our country”. She is very much like “the truncated, blood-stained Bharat” – free, yet in chains of apathy, liberated yet enslaved by the minds of people (EGOG, 38).

The likeness with the Anusasan parva of the Mahabharata is in the similarity between the precepts of Bhishma and the strictures and constraints imposed as a part of social living in Sutara’s everyday existence in the Basu household. The attempt to discipline and punish such “abducted and displaced women” seems to be the responsibility of society around such women. Amulya babu can see the parallel as he perceives the similarities between Sutara and other mythological women: “Amba of the Mahabharat and Sita of the Ramayana (EGOG, 47). There is a constant parallel drawn between Sutara and Draupadi. In fact she teaches at the college named after her (Yajnaseni College, Delhi). The common bond of pain and rejection unites all these mythological women. Sita is abducted by Ravana and has to face rejection by her beloved husband; Amba, the daughter of the king of Kasi is carried off by Bhishma alongwith sisters Ambika and Ambalika to be wives of Vichitravirya. Since, she was the betrothed of the king of Salva, she is restored to him by Bhishma and yet is rejected by him as she had been in another man’s home. Draupadi’s tale of injustice too is well-known. Won by Arjuna at the Swyamwar, she is fated to be ‘divided’ amongst five brothers by a strange verdict. However, her final dishonour in the Sabha parva of the Mahabharat is known to all.

As summed up by Amulya babu, a woman is often subjected to the
prejudices that have been prevalent since the time of Mary Magdalene, and even before the Bible. This cross-cultural unison in matters of violence against women is like a social group that is “like the wheels of Jagannath, trampling individuals underfoot heartlessly (EGOG, 48). It is his suggestion that salvages Sutara’s future for education and financial independence which are like sustaining forces in the life of such an exiled woman. The lessons learnt in exile are like the precepts of Bhishma – they are like barbs that make her conscious of being ‘the Other’. As one of the relatives of Sanat, remarks she had “lost her caste, her honour, everything” (EGOG, 61) yet the strangely inhuman attitude of society awaits her. She is treated as the “unacceptable girl” but more like an outcaste or an untouchable (EGOG, 64).

The third section of the novel is named after the famous lamentation of the Mahabharata where Gandhari and the other women mourn the deaths and loss of both men and women. But as the writer rightly suggests the true – story of the suffering of women is yet to be written. While pondering over the name of the college where Sutara teaches history, Sutara wonders why Draupadi and not Sita should be the ideal of womanhood. Perhaps, the same inspiration made thinkers like Lohiya suggest that Draupadi and not Sita is the ideal.21 In order to survive victimization perhaps the paradigm of Draupadi, the bold, vengeful woman with a voice is needed as against the timid Sita. When Sutara wonders whether education can liberate her, she ponders to herself “Do women ever become independent?” (EGOG, 69). Perhaps the writer suggests that some feel burdened by the conventions that are appended to their bodies. “She became part of the history of women of all time – Satya, Treta, Dwapar and Kali Yuga” (EGOG, 69). It is as if she has
become an icon of all women who have been “insulted, tortured, neglected, deserted through history “ (EGOG, 69). As to the question whether history ever represents the woman’s voice, Sutara realizes as a history teacher – “The presiding deity of history is mute, and perhaps deaf as well” (EGOG, 74).

While living in Delhi, she realizes that her trauma in Noahkhali is the shared experience of many women of Punjab. She realizes that the bond of suffering was common to women of all communities. The intense consciousness of being a “social outcaste”, the learning and crystallization that she is not acceptable intensify (EGOG, 90). The metaphor of a third class traveller or Tagore’s lampstand image that throws light up but suspends the region below in darkness, compress the predicament of women like her. In a discussion with Moinuddin and Aziz, Sutara is rightly reminded that women since ages from Lucretia, Sita, Sati, Amba, Tapati, Vedbati, Draupadi have been treated similarly. The perennial nature of the treatment of women and other communities is summed up when Ali says that “history repeats itself” (EGOG, 103). The journey of Sutara is like that of Draupadi or any other wronged woman. In an attempt to conclude on that note, the last section comes close to a conclusion with Sutara’s journey along with some other women to Rishikesh. “The great exit of the Mahabharata” is no coincidence (EGOG, 106). “The writer of the epic had no time to lament” Draupadi who was the first one to fall and die on the journey to Himalayas (EGOG, 108).

The parallel between Sutara and Draupadi is drawn by Jyotirmoyee Devi in an attempt to write the woman’s chapter in human history (the
The twelve years of exile for Draupadi and her husbands are similar to the tumultuous and trying times that this abducted and assaulted girl has undergone. Promode, who wishes to rectify the wrongs done to women like her i.e., “those who can’t, die like Sita” (EGOG, 118). The truncated nation divided into two (just as Solomon had ordered the child to be divided) gave birth to many such women. As Promode argues a Sita may follow Ram into exile but when she is banished, no one comes to her rescue. Similarly, when Draupadi was the first to fall, no one not even her dearest Arjun stopped to mourn her. Promode’s proposal to marry Sutara, who has been exiled for the last twelve years as an “unacceptable girl”, is a step taken to rehabilitate her. Her twelve year exile strengthens the connection between her and Draupadi and numerous other women like Sita, Amba, Mary Magdalene (EGOG, 125).

“Refugees” like her are still unacceptable. Promode’s words of love and trust are a relief to her. After twelve years of banishment, she has finally been accepted. Her body that had been weighed down by stigma suddenly feels overwhelmed like an overwhelmed river, the river in deluge. This revolutionary work thus tries to highlight how the onus of patriarchy’s crimes and desecration are paid for by women. Sutara’s story reveals the politics of appropriation and rejection of a woman’s body that became the common game of both communities during the bifurcation. One of the repeated allusions in the story is to Gandhi, who never wanted independence at the cost of two nations. While Gandhi represents non-violence, the story narrates the horrifying story of violence. Jyotirmoyee Devi’s novel that is dedicated to “the tortured and exploited women of all ages and lands” is a revolutionary work on more than one count. In fact, this “cerebral” writer (as she was described by Mahasweta Devi) is one of
the first and one of the best in terms of paving the path of feminist writing. *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* is a palimpsestic work as it embosses a new story of the Partition holocaust on the subtext of the *Mahabharata*. In fact this work comes close to a modern-day “Stree Parva” in narrating one of women’s narratives.

**BHISHAM SAHNI’S TAMAS (HINDI)**

Another work that engages with the historical happenings during the Partition of India and Pakistan is Bhisham Sahni’s *Tamas*. Described as a “reflective response to the partition” by film-maker Govind Nihalani who filmed the same, *Tamas* captures the turbulence of the historical moment and has been appraised as a work with epic dimensions. The novel explores among the many facets of communal violence, the attempt of two communities to control and attack the ‘Other’ community. During the rioting that resulted from the Partition, the Hindus and Muslims attempt to avenge themselves on each other in various ways. One of them, a pet-strategy in conflict situations is the attempt to overpower the sexuality of the other community. Women, of course are the easy target in such situations. The rape and murder of women of the other community is chronicled amply by most narratives dealing with the Partition.

However, an interesting aspect of this vendetta emerges on the scene. Both men and women become victims of the attempt to control the ‘other’. While women’s bodies are grossly attacked and violated, the men of the other community are endowed with a different identity in several ways. The shearing off of Iqbal Singh’s (Harnam Singh’s son) - a Sikh’s hair is tragically similar to what is done to women. The rape of women and denial to a Sikh man to keep his long hair can be seen as attempts to
control the other person’s body and identity. Interestingly there is a proper resignification and Iqbal Singh is rechristened Sheikh Iqbal Ahmed – endowed with a new identity and denied his own. Other incidents such as the circumcision of men (according to the Muslim custom) \( \textit{Tamas, 222} \), are also similar attempts to control identity like the mutilation of women’s bodies.

The fate of women however is worse. Their violation is more blatant due to their vulnerability. Since, most cultures view the female body as the site of a community’s honour, the female body is attacked and appropriated grossly. The rape and killing of women during the period by Hindus of Muslims and vice-versa was like the writing on the wall. \textit{Tamas} narrates how men try to salvage the honour of their community by killing their women or persuading them to commit suicide to prevent their violation. Harnam Singh and his wife who have fled their village Dhok Ilahi Baksh, have been rendered homeless by the rioters. Fearing the attack by the rioters during their search for a shelter, Harnam Singh pledges to his wife Banto that if attacked by the Muslims, “I’ll shoot you and then shoot myself. I’ll not allow you to fall into their hands while I’m alive (\textit{Tamas, 160}).

A gathering of men outside Sheikh Ghulam Rasool’s house boasts about its violence and attacks on the other community. The men particularly brag about their adventures with how they treated women of the other community. The violation of women on a mass scale is narrated rather casually. A man recalls how they caught a Hindu woman when the “karars” (derogatory term for the Hindus) had taken to their heels. She was about to jump over the railing to another roof to take shelter, when
12 of these men caught her and then “Nabi, Lalu, Meer etc. they all had her turn by turn” (Tamas, 196). The last man narrated how he “had been doing it with a corpse!” (Tamas, 196). The utter helplessness of women of the other community when attacked by the masculinity of one community was like a tacit norm in those turbulent times.

*Tamas* contrasts the passivity of women and their conditioning to prefer death to their violation in order to salvage their community honour with instances of women willing to be raped in order to save their lives. A man narrates while bragging that a ‘bagri’ (low caste woman) begged to save her life. He reports her saying, “All the seven of you can have me… Do with me what you like but don’t kill me” (Tamas, 197). But strangely when the women of the other community plead to be allowed to live even at the cost of their violation, their life is terminated. The woman who pleaded thus, we are told, is felled with a knife. Thus, a perverted mindset, a belligerent spirit guides the aggression of one community towards the other.

While the aggression of the other community stands highlighted in this work, it also examines and unhems the insidious politics of alienation within the community. The school peon’s daughter Prakasho is abducted by Allah Rakha who had been interested in her. A situation where one community is undermined becomes an ideal situation where men can impose their sexuality on women of another community.

Yet, the work also shows how the communities disown their own
women when they are in a way defiled even by their communion with them. Prakasho’s mother abandons hope of regaining her daughter: “It’s too late now. They must have already forced the bad thing into her mouth (i.e. food in a Muslim home). The alacrity with which women are abandoned by their own communities reveals how women cease to be individuals and are treated as the property of their communities.

When the Gurudwara is attacked, the women clad in white emerged to walk to their death, clad in white. Jasbir Kaur, the first one is in a state of “religious ecstasy” (Tamas, 199). The women walk towards the well to inter themselves. The well is their grave. The “unearthly” women walk to their death. A tacit, unanimous and communal decision seems to have been taken on behalf of every woman. The women are interred in the darkness of the well—their grave. Having uttered the name of God (Vah Guru!), they walk to their death. Hari Singh and Deva Singh’s wives follow with their infants. The decision to prefer death over the loss of honour that they fear results from rape and abduction, is a communal one. When the Muslims arrive only wails of children and screams can be heard from the well. Not a single woman remained in the Gurudwara. The screams and cries of women and children merged with the cries of “Allah -O-Akbar!” and “Sat Sri Akal!” (Tamas, 200).

Bhisham Sahni certainly draws our attention to the fact that both the Muslim and Sikh community have pronounced the verdict of death for these women. The harrowing silence and the embracing of death in this obedient manner shocks the sensibility of the reader. Once more women’s bodies are sacrificed at the altar of community honour which each community tries to salvage. What remains of these women are the
“women’s dopattas, bangles and plaied hair strings” strewn between the path from the gurdwara and the well (Tamas, 200). The tragic embrace of darkness and death are the fate of women. Tamas also points out to the discrepancy in the treatment meted out by the two communities to men and women. When women are abducted and raped, their bodies are appropriated, exploited and mutilated, whereas men undergo acts of circumcision or shaving of hair/beards that are sacramental marks. They are rechristened and a new identity is endowed upon them. However, we can see the discrimination. Women’s identities are not only reordained, their bodies are branded, mutilated or interred into their graves prematurely by the diktat of their community. Tamas, thus highlights how women suffer the double bind of exploitation, first by the other community and then by their own.