



BOOK REVIEW

Borders & Boundaries

Women in India's Partition

Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin

Kali for Women, Delhi, 1998, pp274, Price Rs 300

Review : ○ Rita Manchanda

It was an awkward moment as Pakistanis and Indians came out of the auditorium after seeing Shyam Benegal's film *Mammo*. The Pak-India Forum's first ever meeting of 100 citizens each from both the countries in New Delhi in February 1996 was meant to build a people-to-people dialogue of shared concerns, about peace and democracy across the border based on an acceptance of the settled existence of two independent states. But, here was a film which in its treatment of a family divided by Partition, in particular the plight of divided women family members, raised again the question of "belonging", of the failure to feel "settled" in Pakistan and the necessary choice of return to India, for the widowed aunt, *Mammo*.

It was the co-chair of the forum, Dr Mubashir Hasan, himself a refugee from Panipat, whose experience of his family's displacement and settlement, helped to put in perspective the embarrassing uneasiness engendered by *Mammo* as a political metaphor. In the case of his mother too, there had been a deep sense of not feeling "settled" in Pakistan. Her persistent refusal to accept the finality of division, of Partition, was epitomised in her refusal to consider that the family's final resting place-

the family graveyard-could be anywhere other than the ancestral land in India. His mother's final acceptance of Partition, of "belonging", was demonstrated when she asked her son, Dr Hasan, to secure a piece of land for a family graveyard in Pakistan.

This question of "belonging" is a dominant theme in Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's book, *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, as they track the experience of violence, displacement and settlement in the process of Partition from a gender perspective. Partition, they argue, posed the question of "belonging" by polarising choice and allegiance in such a way as to aggravate old antagonisms, denying a shared past. In their attempt to problematise the experience of "belonging" for women in relation to gender, their family, the community and nation-state in a time of civil war and Partition. Menon and Bhasin demonstrate how in a time of communal violence each one of women's identities is set up against the other-as women, as members of a family and community, and as members of a nation-state. Through women's personal histories of Partition is laid bare the ambivalent meaning community, religion, freedom and the State have for

women, thus leading to a basic questioning about women's identity and their unequal status as citizens.

Menon and Bhasin's feminist reading of Partition provides a powerful critique of the accepted and acceptable version of the political history of the time. It postulates the Indian state, as abductor in the programme of forcible recovery of abducted women, where women's rights as full-fledged citizens were sacrificed in the patriarchal pursuit of protecting the purity of the "legitimate" family and religious community. In a very provocative analysis of the abducted woman, the authors explore how the abducted woman came to symbolise the crossing borders and the violation of social, cultural and political boundaries.

In the process of women serving as boundary markers between national and ethno-religious collectivities, their emergence as citizens with equal rights was compromised.

According to official estimates of abducted women during Partition, there were 55,000 Muslim women in India and 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan. Over a period of eight years 30,000 abducted women were recovered, many forcibly, leaving behind husbands, children and family attachments, so

that the State could restore them to their “legitimate” religious community. ‘B’, a 16-year-old, was left behind in Pakistan. She had tried to commit suicide by jumping off a three-storey house but she survived, only breaking her leg. When the family left, her father was obliged to remain behind with her in a camp. The Muslim tehsildar (a district sub-divisional official) in the camp took her father away and killed him. But he had promised her father he would look after the daughter till her relatives came for her. She stayed with the tehsildar’s family and when none of her relatives came for her, she was married off to the tehsildar’s son. After eight years her brother came to claim her. By now ‘B’ was a mother of two children and was expecting a third. She wanted to stay back but relented when her brother threatened to kill himself unless she agreed to go along with him. Her third child was born in an internment camp in India. ‘B’ refused to go to her brother’s home in India, protesting, “I’ve lost every thing.” ‘B’ came with three children and lived out the rest of her life in a home for Partition displaced women and widows.

The abducted women’s recovery programme, was even at that time mired in controversy, as evident from the debate in Parliament around the 1949 Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act. Most accounts have focused on the indomitable role of Mridula Sarabhai, both critical and panegyric like Aparna Basu’s biography. Menon and Bhasin, shift that focus, to pick up the twice broken lifelines of the women “recovered” through the accounts of the social workers and the poignant testimonies of the women themselves. One recovered woman confronted Mridula Sarabhai, “You

say abduction is immoral and so you are trying to save us. Well, now, it’s too late. One marries only once, willingly or by force. We are now married. What are you going to do with us? Ask us to get married again? Is that not immoral?” (p 97) Sarabhai saw recovery work not as a humanitarian problem but as an extension of her political ideology. *Borders & Boundaries* dramatically presents the inherent contradictions in the recovery programme, and the ambivalence and even quiet forms of resistance shown by the social workers undertaking a cruel job. It is a passionate rendering despite the erudite references which seek to analytically place the question of “belonging” and the politics of the recovery of abducted women in the feminist historiography of women’s bodies as boundary markers between ethnic, religious and national collectivities. Menon and Bhasin blaze an exciting and innovative trail in laying bare the patriarchal concern underlying the State-sponsored programme of reasserting control over their women’s sexuality and thus reestablishing boundaries. Through their analysis of the parliamentary debate on Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Bill they expose how, “Women’s sexuality as it had been violated by abduction, transgressed by enforced conversion and marriage and exploited by impermissible cohabitation and reproduction, was at the centre of debates about national duty, honour, identity and citizenship”. (p 20).

Why should national honour be bound up with bodies of women and in particular, the children of “wrong unions”? Were the children to be considered Hindu or Muslim? The uneasiness over the children of abducted women and the concern

with “purity” in the debates on the bill, reflected the impermissibility of transgressing boundaries-family, community and nationality and the anxiety about forced conversions. There was the Indian state coming forward to reclaim “those it called its own”. Indeed, Menon and Bhasin stretch this logic into the present and see the recovery of Hindu sites usurped by Muslims as part of the same driving force.

In India, (unlike Pakistan where the recovery programme was pursued with much less zeal) at a time when national-state identity was in the process of being forged, the communal identity of these women-Hindu or Muslim-was privileged over all other identities, by a secular democratic India.

Here was the Indian state striving to uphold its secular character vis-avis Pakistan, but compelled to secure communitarian interests at home in the aftermath of division of the country on communal lines. Social worker, Kamla Patel, who was active in the recovery programme is quoted as saying, “It was not a question of Hindu or Muslim, it was a question of where they belong.” Where they “belonged” was determined along communal lines. In the government’s construction of the abducted woman’s identity, she was: i) a member of a religious community, ii) vested with full responsibility for upholding community honour, and iii) denied autonomy in defining her as a victim of an act of transgression which violated the most critical site of patriarchal control.

Images of the systemic rape of Bosnian Muslim women in the Serbian nationalist agenda of ethnic cleansing, come to mind as Menon and Bhasin construct the symbolic identity of the abducted woman and her counterpart, the “honourably dead” woman in the politics of Partition.

The communal violence against women was—as is now—of an extreme sexual nature. The tattooing or branding of their breasts with a crescent moon or trident marked permanently the dishonouring of their respective community. The memory of 200 women being made to dance naked in a gurdwara (a Sikh temple) finds its mirror image in the communal violence in Surat and the filming of collective sexual violation of Muslim women in post-1947 India. The memories which stay to haunt, are those which tell the stories of the “honourably dead”, the women who were killed by kinsmen or committed collective “suicide” to avoid the humiliation and nightmare of rape. Dr Virsa Singh, a refugee from Sheikhpura settled in Amritsar, shot 50 to 60 women—his wife, mother and daughter and all the other village women who were brought before him. He killed them to save them.

The complicity of silence which sanctioned this violence against women, is broken by the “different truths”, revealed in the “different telling” by women especially the stories of their quiet resistance. Taran, who lives in Kanpur, recalled how as a young girl she lived each day in dread because the womenfolk were in constant danger of being killed. Still this fear did not prevent her from wearing a new suit everyday. She told her mother, “Beji, since we’re going to die, why shouldn’t I wear all my nice clothes now. Why should someone else wear them when I’m dead.”

Menon and Bhasin untangle the skeins of a continuum of violence against women which has often involved either death at the hands of kinsmen, or rape and brutalisation by men of the other community. And the covert violence of the State in the recovery programme for abducted women. What connects

them is a powerful consensus around the subject of violence against women. Communal violence dramatically highlighted in a time of rupture and the daily dose of violence against women is seen as part of the same continuum, the same consensus.

Borders & Boundaries is a feminist reading of Partition which constructs the experience of violence and resettlement of women in a postmodernist language and structure. But in the recasting of Partition history, there is the danger of telling the story in a manner that fits the post-modernist problematic of “appropriating gender”. These misgivings aside, the book powerfully establishes the legitimacy of telling the story of the State-sponsored recovery of Hindu-Muslim women post-Partition, as reinforcing ethnic differences and

reaffirming the necessity of regulating women’s sexuality in the interest of national honour. This telling of women’s histories of Partition aligns it with the tradition of feminist historiography which underlines women as boundary markers of ethnic or national difference and therefore reproducers of ethnic and cultural boundaries. It establishes the continuum of a type of violence stretching from women in India’s Partition to Bosnian women in the 1990s. In the end it is the women’s stories, most sensitively evoked in all their contradictions and nuances, where silences speak as loud as words, which defy any neat analytical fit. Their stories poignantly demonstrate as Taran says, “If women wrote history, men would realise how important peace is.” □

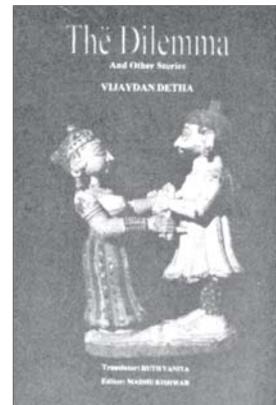
The Dilemma

and Other Stories

By Vijaydan Detha

Translator: Ruth Vanita

Editor: Madhu Kishwar



Vijaydan Detha’s stories provide a scintillating glimpse of the rich repertoire of folk tales of Rajasthan—stories in which women challenge and subvert male defined institutions and norms without losing their dignity and femininity. This collection stands out for affirming the joy of living as well as for its vision of more egalitarian and mutually satisfying man-woman relationships.

169 pages ♦ Paperback ♦ Price: Rs 150 (India), US\$ 15 (Abroad)

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