

## **Reimagining of Humans in Partition Literature**

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### **Abstract:**

The Partition of India in 1947 constitutes one of the most catastrophic political ruptures of the twentieth century, marked not only by mass displacement and communal violence but also by deeply unequal power relations and gendered forms of marginalization. While nationalist historiography has largely prioritized political negotiations and territorial realignments, women's experiences particularly those involving abduction, sexual violence, displacement, and forced prostitution have remained systematically silenced and marginalized. This paper examines how Partition functioned as a gendered catastrophe by analyzing the representation of women's survival, agency, and coerced entry into prostitution in two seminal works of Bengali literature: Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun* and Manik Bandopadhyay's *The Final Solution*.

**Keywords:** Partition of India (1947), Power and Marginalization, Displacement and Trauma, sexual violence.

Instead of looking at Partition only as a political or historical event, my paper approaches it as a deeply gendered human tragedy, where women's bodies became the most vulnerable sites of violence, displacement, and exploitation. Using tools from feminist criticism, postcolonial ideas, and trauma theory, I argue that texts like these are secret keepers of truth. They hold onto the feelings and hidden stories that official records ignore. The Partition of India in 1947 constitutes one of the most catastrophic political ruptures of the twentieth century, marked not only by mass displacement and communal violence but also by profound gendered trauma. While nationalist historiography has largely prioritized political negotiations and territorial realignments, women's experiences particularly those involving abduction, sexual

violence, displacement, and forced prostitution have remained marginalized. This dissertation examines how Partition functioned as a gendered catastrophe by analyzing the representation of women's survival, agency, and coerced entry into prostitution in two seminal works of Bengali literature: Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun* and Manik Bandopadhyay's *The Final Solution*.

In this context, many women were pushed into prostitution as a means of survival due to economic deprivation, loss of kinship networks, and societal rejection. Partition literature has extensively recorded women's suffering; however, narratives concerning women in prostitution often remain marginal, silenced, or portrayed through reductive lenses of victimhood and moral judgement.

The problem, therefore, lies in the lack of sustained literary and critical analysis of women in prostitution within Partition narratives and the absence of a longitudinal perspective that examines how their representation and social positioning have evolved over time. This study seeks to address this gap by undertaking a qualitative and doctrinal analysis of selected Partition texts, situating literary representations within their historical and feminist contexts. By doing so, the research aims to foreground marginalised voices and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender, survival, and agency in Partition literature.

A significant aspect of this research is its engagement with state interventions such as the *Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act of 1949*. While intended to "recover" women abducted during Partition, such laws often denied women agency by forcibly repatriating them to families or nations they no longer identified with. Feminist scholars such as Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon have highlighted how these measures reproduced patriarchal control while erasing women's voices. Butalia delves deeply into the treatment of women both during and after the partition. The author raises pertinent concerns about the fate of women who were uprooted and ill-prepared to cope with the psychological fallout of Partition. Being "left with the task of rebuilding the community" and "at the receiving end of violence as victims," she says that "women remain essentially non-violent". A central idea in Ritu Menon's work is that women's experiences of Partition were systematically silenced in official histories.

The study also aims to analyse narrative techniques such as fragmentation, silence, memory, and symbolism, exploring how these literary strategies mirror the

workings of trauma and repression. Finally, the research intends to establish literature as a moral and emotional archive that bridges the gap between historical fact and lived experience, redefining survival as an act of resistance rather than passive victimhood.

The symbolic nature of this violence is evident in the brutality inflicted upon women. Survivors recount experiences of public stripping, gang rape, forced nudity, and mutilation. In some cases, women's bodies were carved with religious symbols or slogans, transforming them into literal texts of communal hatred. Such acts aimed to destroy not only the individual woman but the moral fabric of the community she represented.

Historical records and feminist testimonies reveal that abduction was not always carried out by strangers. In many instances, neighbours, acquaintances, or even former friends participated in these acts, revealing how communal identities rapidly replaced personal bonds. The normalization of sexual violence within riot conditions created an environment in which women's suffering was both expected and sanctioned.

Girl children were particularly vulnerable within this system of violence. Their age made them easier to control and transport, and they were often absorbed into domestic servitude or sexual exploitation. The absence of documentation regarding child victims underscores the gendered and age-based silencing inherent in Partition historiography.

Mass displacement during Partition dismantled the social structures that had previously regulated women's lives. Refugee camps, railway platforms, abandoned buildings, and border towns became spaces of extreme precarity where hunger, homelessness, and insecurity intersected. In these liminal spaces, women lost the minimal protection afforded by family, community, and social norms.

The trauma experienced by women during Partition was not limited to physical violence; it extended into psychological fragmentation and enforced silence. Many survivors were unable or unwilling to articulate their experiences due to shame, fear, and social stigma. Feminist scholars argue that silence itself became a language of trauma, reflecting the impossibility of narrating such profound violation.

Partition played havoc on women. Women are associated with the idea of honour in society. They were targeted by men irrespective of their religious and communal identities. They are associated with rape, abduction, torture, and exploited in whatever way men could. Urvashi Butalia writes, “as always there was widespread sexual savagery: about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own (and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion)”.

Many women lost their husbands, children, and relatives. On the one hand they suffered the trauma of loss and on the other they faced violence over their own bodies. All these stories of women's suffering came down to some extent through the oral tradition of family storytelling. Literature has revitalised those painful events in the lives of women. The pains of partition are unforgettable.

Manik Bandopadhyay's *The Final Solution* portrays the tragic condition of a single refugee family living on a railway platform after the Partition of India. The family Mallika, Bhushan, Asha, and their two-and-a-half-year-old child Khokan survive within a tiny space represented by a single mattress, symbolising the extreme scarcity and vulnerability of displaced lives. Mallika, as a mother, suffers intensely while watching her starving child cry for food, which pushes her into a state of desperation.

The story thus presents Partition as a brutal social collapse where capitalism and patriarchy thrive on human suffering. Mallika's final act symbolises women's courage and survival politics within a violent, exploitative post-Partition reality. In *The Final Solution*, Mallika's final act of violence against her exploiter can be read as a radical assertion of agency a personal “final solution” enacted in the absence of justice.

Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun* presents the life of Arjun, a refugee displaced by the India–Pakistan Partition, who migrates with his family from East Pakistan to Bengal after losing his father and home. The novel uses the myth of Arjuna from the Mahabharata to depict Arjun's moral dilemma when he is forced to confront his own community over issues of land, power, and survival in Deshpran Colony (refugee camp)

An important female figure in the novel is Labonya, who represents women's vulnerability and resistance within a patriarchal refugee society. Labonya is a young

woman interested in education, but she becomes a victim of sexual violence when Dibya attempts to exploit her. Traumatized and socially silenced, she withdraws into psychological isolation. However, unlike passive victims, Labonya eventually retaliates by stabbing Dibya, asserting her agency through an act of self-defence and revenge. Her character parallels Draupadi from the Mahabharata and symbolises women's struggle against patriarchal oppression. Through Labonya, the novel highlights gendered trauma and the possibility of female resistance in post-Partition society.

Manik Bandopadhyay's *The Final Solution* offers one of the most searing depictions of this reality. The protagonist, Mallika, lives with her family on a railway platform, reduced to an animalistic existence described as "huddled like herds of cattle." Her decision to enter prostitution is driven not by desire but by starvation and maternal responsibility. Her skeletal child becomes the moral axis of her choice, transforming prostitution into an act of desperate care rather than moral collapse.

Similarly, *Arjun* portrays a post-Partition society where refugee women occupy liminal spaces neither fully integrated nor protected, making them vulnerable to exploitation by brokers, pimps, and opportunistic men.

By examining *Arjun* and *The Final Solution*, this dissertation argues that Partition literature functions as an ethical archive that records women's suffering, resilience, and resistance. These texts dismantle nationalist myths, expose patriarchal betrayal, and reframe prostitution as a coerced survival strategy rather than a moral failure. In reclaiming women's voices, the study asserts that survival itself becomes an act of defiance.

The study remains significant for its attempt to foreground women's voices, interpret trauma as a site of resistance, and position literature as an ethical archive that preserves the emotional truth of Partition.

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