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At a Loss for Words: Reading the Silence in South Asian Women's Partition Narratives¹

I have come to believe that there is no way we can begin to understand what Partition was about, unless we look at how people remember it.

—Urvashi Butalia 1998

The issue is not simply with remembering or forgetting, but rather with how the nation remembers to forget, with how, that is, the representations of a remembered past serve an imaginary coherence that remains closed to the other.

—Mario Di Paolantonio 2000

Recently, much has been written about the gendered nature of violence that accompanied India's partition.² Veena Das's *Critical Events* (1994), Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998), and Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (1998) have attempted to collect and make sense of the testimonies of people who lived through these events. Each of these books has a particular interest in thinking through the implications of sectarian violence for women who experienced social alienation—a result of the discourse of contamination that came to inflect their identities as symbols of the defiled national imaginaries of India and Pakistan at the time of partition in 1947. The exceptionally thought-provoking work by this group of researchers has been instrumental in bringing the treatment of so-called “abducted” women and the activities of the state-sanctioned Recovery Operation (1947–1955) to the attention of the scholars and the general public.³ Yet, what each of these researchers has encountered in attempting to document and make sense of survivors'

memories of this period is a silence about the actual details of the violence. A similar silence is found in literature that is purported to represent the events of partition and “abducted” women’s experience. In what follows, I will argue that, in both cases, this silence serves a pedagogical purpose in reframing our attitude toward partition history.

One such silence can be found in Jyotirmoyee Devi’s novel *The River Churning* (1995), recently translated from Bengali into English by Enakshi Chatterjee.⁴ It tells the story of Sutara, a young Hindu girl who is orphaned by partition violence and taken in by her Muslim neighbours; when she is later “returned” to her extended family in Calcutta, her relatives shun her. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes apparent that, while Sutara’s “recovery” is legitimated by a view of Hindu women as the property of a normalized Hindu masculine citizen-subject, her rejection is also the result of this same assumption, which turns her into a permanent refugee in her so-called homeland. The novel depicts how Sutara is forced to endure the scorn of her community in order to sustain a patriarchal view of Indian nationalism. What are not represented in the novel, however, are Sutara’s experiences during the riots: the events that ironically provide the Indian state with the basis for “recovering” her and for her extended Hindu family’s rejection of her. These events are left obscure in Devi’s text, and this surprising gap in the narrative, as in the testimonies of “abducted” women collected by scholars like Butalia and Das, is what preoccupies my reading of *The River Churning*. The significance of this silence—the unassimilable gap that it represents in Sutara’s experience—and what it suggests about literature and literary reading strategies as a practice of historical memory will be the focus of my discussion here.

Historical memory is a term that Roger Simon defines as a “public pedagogy of commemoration, [with] a decidedly socially inflected repetition” (2000:9). Central to Simon’s definition and to my own discussion of historical memory is a notion of remembrance that is not *simply* a retelling or “a pedagogy of anamnesis, a practice that seeks the recovery of what has been lost, neglected, or misplaced” (Simon, Eppert, Clamen, and Beres forthcoming). While this kind of strategic act of remembrance “is aligned with the anticipation of a reconciled future in which one hopes that justice and harmonious social relations might be secured” (Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert 2000:4), it conceals its own will to power and thus ultimately risks having encouraged forgetting with regards to the power relations expressed through its own narrative practice. As Simon and his colleagues argue, the main educative imperative of strategic remembrance rests on “a moralizing pedagogy” that can only respond to the failure to remember how the past continues to haunt the present with “further directives to tell again, and to tell with increased urgency, thereby invoking an absolutist moral demand that one must listen” (2000:4). Given the interested and precarious construction of moralistic views of the past, it would seem that this approach to remembrance raises more epistemological and practical problems about how to address the injustices of the past than it solves.

The kind of pedagogy that historical memory suggests is that of anagnorisis, “a learning from “the past” that is a critical recognition or discovery that unsettles the very terms on which our understanding of ourselves and our world is based” (Simon et al. forthcoming). In the context of literary studies, historical memory as a practice of

anagnorisis considers how texts act as a call to witness by disrupting “our”⁵ understanding about “the past” and its relationship to the present each time the reader engages in the act of reading as remembrance. As Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert suggest, “implicated in this remembrance is a learning to live with loss, a learning to live with a return of memory that inevitably instantiates loss and thus bears no ultimate consolation, a learning to live with a disquieting remembrance” (2000:4). Here, remembrance is no longer an act of volunteerism but “an assignment, not simply a matter of choice” which “continues to pose questions of what it means to live in the shadows of mass violence” (4).

What the practicalities of this kind of commemoration would involve, therefore, would be an attention to not only *whose* or *what* history is represented, but, indeed, *how* it is represented and for *what purpose*. These are issues that have preoccupied historiographers and scholars in postcolonial studies for some time. Subaltern historiographer Dipesh Chakrabarty helps to highlight this particularly modernist and European epistemological problem when he reflects on how the entire practice of writing history is embedded in the colonial project. As Chakrabarty points out, modernist assumptions that inform the academic discourse of history (i.e., modernity as a denial of all other perspectives of time and space) position Europe as the “sovereign theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Kenyan’ and so on” (1992:1). What gets written out of this kind of history, Chakrabarty argues, are the “ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force and the tragedies and the ironies that attend” the founding of the nation-state (21). The view that testimony and realist literary accounts can somehow provide a form of “direct” access to the past that transcends these ambiguities through their reflective and mimetic representational strategies feeds into a modern perception of reality and what Meaghan Morris has described as “the modern as a known history, something which has already happened elsewhere, and which is to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise with a local content” (1990:10). In this context, the strategic desire to “recover” the experience of “abducted” women, in order to enlarge or correct “our” understanding of history as a descriptive and seamless record of the past, risks turning women who testify into informants who allow “us” to remember the past in comfortable ways and to move on. Given that the stated goal of much of the work on women’s experience of partition is to explore how attention to gender identity can disrupt past and present hegemonic definitions of national identity, a wariness of these kinds of retellings would seem to be in order.

While only recently has much been said about the *gendered* nature of partition violence, the fact that violence against women took place has always been acknowledged widely. Indeed, debates in the Indian Constituent Assembly, nationalist history, and the media in general have mobilized many gruesome images of women as objects victimized by the community. The attack on the nation that these images suggest is evident in the importance the Indian state placed on clarifying the status of female refugees as quickly as possible. For example, in 1946, even before the actual date of independence, the Congress Party adopted a resolution that linked the restoration of civil order explicitly to the recovery of women refugees—commonly assumed to have been “abducted.” The resolution read,

The immediate problem is to produce a sense of security and rehabilitate homes and villages which have been broken up and destroyed. Women who have been abducted and forcibly married must be restored to their homes. Mass conversions which have taken place forcibly have no significance or validity and the people affected by them should be given every opportunity to return to their homes and the life of their choice. (Das 1994:60)

The contradiction between the Assembly's resolution that *people* should be given every opportunity to return to their homes and the life of their choice but that *women must* be restored to their homes is symptomatic of the patriarchal norms that privileged the rights of male citizens at the expense of women at the time of partition. This contradiction was underscored a few years later with the definition of an "abducted person" in the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Bill (1949) as "a male child under the age of sixteen years or a female of *whatever age*" who would then be subject to the will of a tribunal in determining his or her nationality after "recovery" (Menon and Bhasin 1996:8–9, emphasis added). Though the activities of the Central Recovery Operation were presented as a humanitarian response to the situation in which women found themselves as a result of partition violence, these contradictions suggest that these actions are really better understood as an expression of the kind of "violence and idealism" which Chakrabarty has argued "lies at the heart of the process by which the narrative of citizenship and modernity come to find a natural home in 'history'" (1992:22).

Recent scholarship on "abducted" women's treatment during and after partition puts pressure on the seemingly benign humanism that underpins the resolution and Bill to disclose it as an alibi for the manipulation of women's bodies, sexualities and identities by both community and state to serve their mutual patriarchal interests. Urvashi Butalia's analysis of the stories published in the *Organizer* (a forum for the views of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [R.S.S.]⁶ at the time of partition) supports this point. In the 29 December 1949 issue, Hindu women are represented as "spending sorrowful days and unthinkable nights in Pakistan" at the hands of lustful Muslims (1995:67). Similarly, the *Organizer's* front page story on 14 August 1947 carried an illustration "of Mother India, the map of the country, with a woman lying on it, one limb cut off and severed, with Nehru holding the bloody knife responsible for doing the severing" (Butalia 1995:69). Indeed, there seems to have been no shortage of commentaries on and reports of women's sexual violation at this time. What was absent, however, was any attention to *why* the women were singled out for this treatment, solely on the basis of gender, or what implications this might have for the community and state's construction of belonging, citizenship, or national identity in India and Pakistan today.

These are the questions that researchers like Butalia, Menon, Das, and Pandey have attempted to address in their work with the testimonies of "abducted" women, members of their families and communities, and social workers involved in the Recovery Operation. In each case, however, they have come up against a silence concerning the details of women's experiences during the violence itself. What is remarkable about each of the different attempts to break this silence is that it *seems* continually to be pushed back beyond the access of the researcher. For instance, Urvashi Butalia has documented that,

in the remembrance rituals that take place in gurdwaras [Sikh temples] in different parts of the country, the women's heroic steps in offering themselves up for death are valorized, while their abductions [or stories about women who didn't take their own lives] are glossed over. (1993:WS24)

The dichotomous treatment of these women's stories (as either anonymous victims or celebrated martyrs) might suggest that "abducted" women's stories should be "recovered" through testimony in order to correct an unbalanced view of history. However, while some women survivors' memoirs and testimonies have been collected, these also rehearse the same silence. In her most recent book, Butalia comments that, while conducting interviews for her research, there were frequently moments when,

having begun to remember, to excavate memory, words would suddenly fail speech as memory encountered something too painful, often too frightening to allow it to enter speech. "How can I describe this," would come the anguished cry, "there are no words to do so." At such points I chose not to push further, not to force the surfacing of memories into speech. Telling begun thus would be left incomplete. (Butalia 1998:24)

While Butalia interprets the difficulty that the survivors had in recounting their stories as due to the painful and frightening nature of these memories, other silences seem to be more ambiguous. For example, Gyanendra Pandey recounts that women survivors especially were vague about the details of the partition events. In an interview with members of a Sikh family who lived in the villages of Dhamot and Gharoan in East Punjab during the summer of 1947, where attacks and counter-attacks between Sikhs and Muslims took place, Pandey reports that, when questions were directed at the mother, she "kept turning the questions over to her elder son (the civil servant) and her brother, even though the latter tried to leave the conversation to her and me" (1997:2038). While Pandey describes the elder son's statements as a "sophisticated, rounded account" of the events that summer, by contrast,

the civil servant's mother speaks all too briefly.... She responds repeatedly with the proposition that she has nothing to tell, that she knows nothing about "politics," that her son can answer all these questions and if he has already spoken to me, then surely there is little left to say. She informs me also that "nothing happened in our village," that all attacks (against Muslims) occurred "outside," that she herself never left her home and therefore knew nothing of what was going on outside, and that there was no discussion of these things amongst the women inside the homes. (2038)

Pandey claims that the mother's account is typical of many of the women he has interviewed in that it is different from "the majority of the men's accounts, both in its reticence and repeated avowal of a lack of knowledge and in its sensitivity to the fate of abducted women and children" (2039).⁷

Most researchers argue that the reason stories about partition violence against women remain incomplete is that the socio-political context in India, over fifty years later,

continues to make such testimony into an extremely compromising act for women refugees. For example, caution has been expressed by Anne Hargrove, who suggests that “witnesses” or “survivors” to retell their stories

would potentially mean asking them to invalidate their present status, a process of “informing” on the actions of their husbands and their families in a way that would be both alienating and self-destructive. (1995:2038)

Indeed, it has been documented that some of the women who were initially classified as “abducted” or perceived as polluted as a result of being separated from their families during the sectarian violence have been spared the ostracism experienced by women like Sutara by submitting to a tacit agreement within the community not to speak about their past.⁸ While the stigma attached to “abducted” women’s stories has been often discussed as an obstacle for researchers who desire to compile a “more complete” history of partition, little consideration has been given to the theoretical problems raised by the fact that many women who experienced sectarian violence died during or since that time without giving testimony. The irrevocable loss or gap in the archive that these women’s deaths represents serves to highlight the similarities between the problems of writing a history of partition and writing one of other cultural traumas like the Middle Passage or the Holocaust.

The problem of what kind of history can be told in the absence of an archive, progressive notions of time, or mimetic theories of representation is central to Lyotard’s discussion of how the practice of writing history has been challenged by the events at Auschwitz. In *The Differend* (1988), Lyotard raises the problem of verifying the existence of gas chambers used to kill Jews and other “undesirable” members of society, when to see and “know” the purpose of the gas chambers would mean to have been a victim of its function. He teases out the problem as follows: within modernist conceptions of rationality, for the victim “to have ‘really seen with his own eyes’ a gas chamber would be the condition which gives one the authority to say that it exists and to persuade the unbeliever” (1988:3). “Yet,” Lyotard continues, “it is still necessary to prove that the gas chamber was used to kill at the time it was seen. The only acceptable proof that it was used to kill is that one died from it. But if one is dead, one cannot testify that it is on account of the gas chamber” (3). “With Auschwitz,” he concludes, “something new has happened in history” where what would be considered conventional historical evidence “has been destroyed as much as possible” (57). In the face of this loss of an archive, and the stakes involved in the practice of remembrance in relation to an event like the Holocaust, Lyotard insists that “the historian must break with the monopoly over history granted to the cognitive regime of phrases, and he or she must venture forth by lending his or her ear to what is not presentable under the rules of knowledge” (57).

The partition seems to represent a loss of an archive in these terms: permanent, always already incomplete, and requiring a new way of listening to the other if it is not to go unnoticed by the researcher. Learning to hear “what is not presentable under the rules of knowledge” as it concerns “the informant in history” is something that Gayatri Spivak characterizes as “a responsibility toward the trace of the other” that is

“as much a recovery as it is a loss of the wholly other” (1999:198). This is the “double bind” that Spivak argues informs the “excavation, retrieval and celebration of the historical individual, the effort of bringing her within accessibility” (198). Spivak’s deconstructive approach to reading history underscores how the transparency attributed to testimony, historical narrative, and realist fiction produces another act of containment and appropriation. Thus, even when “abducted” women are interviewed and represented as “speaking for themselves,” it is impossible to escape the process of exclusion, forgetting, translation, and interpretation that informs their statements.

The way language mediates any attempt to represent experience is often overlooked in discussions of partition narratives that are purported to represent “abducted” women’s experiences. For example, in “Telling Tales: Women and the Trauma of Partition in Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*” (1999), Deepika Bahri suggests that the gaps in testimonies by “abducted” women might be filled by literary accounts of their experience. Citing the stigma attached to “abducted” women’s experiences, Bahri raises doubts about the possibility of “retrieving” this history through testimony when, “by all accounts, what remains of women’s experiences of personal violation is either a contract of silence or a reference so oblique as to be little more than *metaphoric abstraction*” (1999:218, emphasis added). Bahri characterizes the metaphoricity or indirectness of these accounts as placing a veil between the “reality” of these women’s experiences and the historian, going on to argue that, “in the absence of *direct* testimony, fictionalized and second-hand accounts have attempted to capture the elusive experiences of women during this turbulent time” (218, emphasis added). The perception that there are historical events outside of discourse that, given the right conditions, “direct” testimony could somehow reveal or “capture” runs throughout Bahri’s discussion. In fact, like the final chapter in Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *Cracking India* (1991), Bahri’s paper is prefaced with a quote from Mohammed Iqbal’s poetry where the speaker calls for

the (mystic) wine that burns all veils,
the wine by which life’s secret is revealed,
the wine whose essence is eternity.
The wine which opens mysteries concealed.
Lift up the curtain, give me power to talk.
(217)

Bahri concludes, “It may well be the task of literary historiography to unveil, uncover, liberate from silence and oblivion” these women’s stories (228).

To argue that literature can fill in the gaps in “abducted” women’s testimonies is to ignore “loss as loss” in the first instance (Spivak 1999:217 n. 33). Though Bahri seems initially to acknowledge this understanding of traumatic experience,⁹ she goes on to argue that readers and writers of partition narratives are able to transcend the gaps in this record through literature, to absorb the “terrible feelings of humanity truncated, tortured,” and to rehearse “the trauma of those who have suffered at the hands of history” (1999:226). To assert that the writer can somehow “know” and convey the experiences of those who have been traumatized is to misunderstand the partiality of the

traumatic experience implied by Caruth's formulation (which Bahri cites), and this assertion obscures the exercise of power through representation. In fact, Bahri goes so far as to suggest that Lenny, the narrator of Sidhwa's novel, is a mere "amanuensis," one who copies or records what is put before her, "a 'neutral' medium that can carry and convey the suffering that would silence its worse victims" (224).¹⁰ The idea that Lenny could occupy a neutral position in the novel's narration not only serves to reinforce specious claims that the Parsi community held a neutral position in colonial India (something that the book itself contests), it ignores the novel's own preoccupation with the constructed nature of perspective.

Bahri points to the incident in which Lenny is tricked into revealing Ayah's hiding place to Ice-candy-man as an example of Lenny's, and by implication the novelist's, "ingrained compulsion to tell the truth." Still, it is equally possible to read this experience as a lesson in the unstable construction of truth, history, and identity (227). As the narrative states, Lenny reveals Ayah's hiding place to Ice-candy-man when she is misled by his "versatile face transformed into a savior's in our hour of need" (Sidhwa 1991:193). Ice-candy-man's shifting face dupes her into believing that he is a friend to the family and to Ayah; Lenny's reference to this deception hints at the constructedness of identity and truth that is emphasized at this and other points throughout the novel. In fact, Lenny's narrative perspective repeatedly invokes metaphors of vision only to subvert them, thus *calling into question* transparent and neutral representations of experience and stable notions of truth.

While, in the absence of testimony, Bahri sees literature as the next best hope for restoring something that has been lost from the historical record, I argue that the silences in "abducted" women's testimonies are a sign of the original incompleteness of history or an example of "loss as loss" in the first instance. As Teresa Heffernan has argued with regard to postmodern history,

it is impossible to translate loss into Symbolic language without acknowledging an even greater loss. In other words, loss is not just an elusive "Thing" but a condition of history, involving an occurrence, which cannot in any (effective) way be "consciously" named. (1995:2-3)

To try to name or "recover" the history of "abducted" women in a definitive way betrays the moment of "difference as well as differance" (Spivak 1999:199) that these events represent in history, and serves as a permission or freedom to forget. If the role of the (literary) historian after Auschwitz (and perhaps after partition) is to "break with the cognitive regime of phrases" and "venture forth by lending his or her ear to what is not presentable under the rules of knowledge" (Lyotard 1988:57), then any attempt to "capture the elusive experiences of women during this turbulent time" in "neutral" terms would seem merely to reinscribe rather than disrupt present exclusionary conceptions of the nation. "Within this form of commemoration (the 'factual liturgy')," as Mario Di Paolantonio argues, "the other has become an object of/for knowledge. This violates the ethical grounds" upon which "knowledge reveals the desire in the formation of a redeemed national identity: an opportunity for self-confirmation, a history lesson on 'who *we* really are'" (2000:164-65). Scholars who claim

that it is possible to complete the historical record with literary representations of “abducted” women’s experience are unwittingly complicit in this kind of exercise of “self-confirmation.”

Simon suggests other ways of approaching the practice of witnessing as a reader of archives, literature, or testimony in ways that account for the unavoidable gaps within and between the other’s experience and one’s own and for the constructedness of perspective. “To be present to testimony,” he argues,

is to be claimed to another in ways that are *not* reducible to blood ties, geographically local or diasporic identities, or humanistic assertions of empathy. This is because in a witnessing relation, one must always be open to the possibility of unforeseen memory, the possibility of unfamiliar or uncanny connections; connections which disrupt attempts to know what meaning a place or moment may hold. (1996:4, emphasis added)

For Simon, it is the disruptive, jarring, unfamiliar, and thus unsettling remembrances which reopen “the certitude of our frames of reference for understanding” the past and its relationship to the present, acting as the “points of connection” in the witnessing relation (4). While Bahri argues that the narrator of *Cracking India* “has made us feel Ayah’s pain in our bodies, in our veins; she has placed upon the reader the weight of a forbidden story that was never meant to be told” (1999:228), Simon’s formulation suggests that the most productive practices of remembrance do not rely on identification with the text, but instead emphasize the metaphoricality or indirectness of “telling” and acknowledge the impossibility of knowing the other’s experience.

The acknowledgement that all “telling” relies on indirect language and involves gaps and silences as a “condition of history” points to the importance of literary reading strategies and literary texts as a potential resource for historians and scholars interested in making sense of testimonies by women who lived through the events of partition. Literature, as a form of writing that foregrounds the figurative and indirect properties of language, is a particularly appropriate place to consider how experience is mediated and to discuss the specific limits of what can be known about that experience. Veena Das makes a similar point in her discussion of how “the language of pain” that informs the representations of “abducted” women’s experience of collective violence relies on a particular poetics. This poetics emerges, Das argues, with the inversion of the common relationship between language and mourning as a result of “the investment of sexuality into the project of nationalism” (1997:71) that placed a burden on women to remain silent or speak indirectly about their experiences after they were “recovered.” “Rather than bearing witness to the disorder that they had been subjected to,” Das states, “the *metaphor* that they [the women] used was a woman drinking poison and keeping it within her” (85, emphasis added). In the course of Das’s interviews,

a woman would say that she is like a discarded exercise book in which the accounts of past relationships were kept—the body a parchment of losses. At any rate, none of the *metaphors* used to describe the self that had become

the repository of poisonous knowledge emphasized the need to give expression to this hidden knowledge. (84, emphasis added)

Das's discussion emphasizes the metaphoricity of women's statements about the violence that they experienced and explains how the patriarchal practice of using their bodies as surfaces for nationalist inscriptions is subverted by this representational strategy:

The bodies of the women were surfaces on which texts were to be written and read—icons of the new nations. But women converted this passivity into agency by using *metaphors* of pregnancy—hiding the pain, giving it a home just as a child is given a home in the woman's body. (85, emphasis added)

Here and elsewhere, Das's discussion of women's testimonies stresses how the women are empowered by their use of indirect or figurative language when they speak about their experiences of collective violence. Das reports that

when asking women to narrate their experiences of the Partition I found a zone of silence around the event. This silence was achieved either by the use of language that was general and *metaphoric* but that evaded specific description of any events so as to capture the particularity of their experience, or by describing the surrounding events but leaving the actual experience of abduction and rape unstated. (84, emphasis added)

As I have argued above, the attempt to account for the significance of women's reliance on figurative and metaphoric expressions of their experience—or what can also be called indirect telling (89)—is key to disrupting modernist conceptions of this history. Perhaps, as Das suggests, "some realities need to be fictionalized before they can be apprehended" (69).

Just exactly how this indirect approach to representing women's experience of the sectarian violence can lead to other ways of uncovering the history of partition is the focus of my discussion of Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning*. The gaps or silences in women's testimonies and literary narratives like Devi's resonate with Lyotard's description of "the differend." In Lyotard's words,

The differend, is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible. This state is signaled by what one ordinarily calls a feeling: "One cannot find the words," etc..... A lot of searching must be done to find new rules for forming and linking phrases that are able to express the differend disclosed by the feeling unless one wants this differend to be smothered right away.... (1988:13)

Lyotard's definition of the differend conceptualizes the "feeling" that "one cannot find the words" as a condition of the discourse that orders "reality" and refuses questions or statements that challenge its ontological basis. A recognition of these "feelings"

places an obligation on the reader in the witnessing relation to conceptualize new ways of knowing that avoid splicing the story and that smooth out the awkward questions that this recognition raises about “reality” within the logic of modernity. My reading of Devi’s novel foregrounds these “feelings” or moments of disruption within its narrative strategies in order to displace the urge to recover “abducted” or “polluted” women’s stories, and instead allows new forms of knowing to emerge. The novel encourages this reading in that it appears to strive to “make its inadequacy present” (Simon et al. forthcoming). It provides a decentred, fragmented view of one “abducted/polluted” woman’s experience after “recovery” through a realist narrative that is constantly interrupted by the gap in Sutara’s experience during the sectarian violence. In Devi’s text, the details of abducted women’s experiences during the partition violence are impressionistic and fragmented, thus undermining the reflective quality of the realist genre that Devi adopts for the rest of her narrative. At the same time, however, the reader comes away with an assignment (in Simon and colleagues’ terms) to pursue a better understanding of the patriarchal, elite, and Hindu-centric interests that have been normalized as secular, universal, and national in India today. In other words, this double movement between the details and the limits of their construction in Devi’s narrative permits “*history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not” (Caruth 1996:11), and thus suggests an ethics for witnessing or reading that focuses on the opacity rather than the transparency of language and the partiality of all knowledge.

The partiality of “abducted” women’s experiences and historical narratives in general is both a performative and thematic concern of Devi’s text. The novel opens as Sutara, a college history teacher in Delhi, reflects on the absence of anything like a *Stree Parva* (women’s chapter) in the annals of history writing, and contemplates the implications of an “official circular that had come to this partly government controlled college giving clear directions regarding the history syllabus, specifying books and authors to be taught” (1995:1). Later, she recalls the questions her students asked her that day concerning “truth and falsehood as presented in history books” (4). As she ponders these questions, her memories of the partition violence that occurred in Noakali, the small village where she grew up, begin to return. Sutara recalls the community’s diverse character where both Hindus and Muslims, rich and poor, lived together in relative peace. With the approach of partition, however, her family learns of riots in Calcutta through a letter from relatives, and that same evening violence breaks out in their own community. That night, after Sutara’s father returns from investigating a fire at a neighbour’s house, he orders her mother to take their daughters into the corner room of the house and to bolt the door from the inside. He warns them, “Don’t come out of the house even if someone calls or bangs on the door” (7). Sutara’s memories of this incident are characterized by confusion over her parents’ fear and why they are asked to barricade themselves in the house.

Eventually, when the fire reaches Sutara’s house, the narrative recounts that her mother emerges to set the livestock free but is intercepted by the family’s Muslim servants and “a few other unknown faces” (8). When Sutara hears her mother cry out, she attempts to go to her but recalls that “she could not make it”:

Dark shadowy figures surrounded her, some tried to grab her by the hand. Breaking free she rushed to the pond at the back and jumped into the water. In the light of the spreading fire everything was now visible. One of the ruffians went after Mother.... But Didi [Sutara's sister] did not stir. Was she dead? What happened to Didi? Sutara couldn't tell. She wanted to reach mother and began to run, but stumbled and fell. Then everything went blank. (8)

The narrative of the attack breaks off here and is never “completed.” The “blankness” that Sutara associates with these events, along with a loss of a sense of time, anxiety, and questions about whether her family members are dead or alive, recurs throughout the novel. In addition, though the narrative states that “in the light of the spreading fire *everything was now visible*” Sutara is unable to “know” if her sister is alive or dead, thus displacing the connection between sight and knowledge (8, emphasis added).

The disjunction between sight and knowledge is reiterated throughout *The River Churning*. After Sutara regains consciousness and is taken in by Tamij's family (her Muslim neighbours), the narrator comments, “days went by, Sutara lost count” and again, “Sutara lost count of days and nights” (10–11). Sutara's disorientation is accompanied by anxiety from an indefinable source and a “loss” of memory that disturbs her:

She had not recovered from the tremendous shock she had received. It had shaken her to the core. The exact nature of the blow which had stunned her physically and mentally was unknown to her—she was only aware of something terrible having crushed her existence out of shape.

She could not clearly remember what had happened but the dreadful memories of that night kept returning like a nightmare. Did she fall to the ground or was she pushed down? What happened after that? Who rescued her and when? For how long had she been running a fever? (16)

When Sutara is first able to walk, she wanders outside and sees the ruins of her family's property in the distance; again she is haunted by “invisible scenes in her mind which she could not get rid of” (19). Devi's paradoxical representation of Sutara's experience—of being haunted by memories that she cannot remember—figures the events of partition in a traumatic mode and raises questions about the possibility of “capturing” her experience in modernist accounts of the birth of the Indian nation-state.

The disruption Sutara's “return” causes in her family (which comprises the larger part of Devi's narrative) attests to the unsettling effect Sutara's subject position has for patriarchal history in the post-partition socio-political context. The patriarchal discourse of contamination that legitimates Sutara's treatment by her extended family is simultaneously displaced and made visible by her refusal to confirm the source of their anxiety regarding her return. From the first letter that Sanat (Sutara's brother) sends after learning about his parents' deaths during the sectarian violence, there is a sense that “something is amiss”; as the narrative states, “Sanat lamented the death of his parents, briefly mentioned his sister. If she wanted to return, they had to think of how to bring her over. But the letter displayed no particular anxiety toward her” (16).

Eventually, when Tamij and his son Aziz bring Sutara to Calcutta, the extent of her rejection becomes clear. As she greets her brother's mother-in-law, she is warned not to touch her—"No, no, don't touch me now. You have not changed your clothes" (31).

She could overhear Boudi's mother's sharp tones, "Are you out of your mind? Her clothes have been polluted by the touch of a Muslim household. Why did you have to go and take her in your arms? ... Don't we have a deity in the house? And Brahmin widows come here also. How can you have her pollute everything?" (31-32)

Although Sutara has not had a chance to explain the conditions of her stay with Tamij's family or to recount what happened to her during the sectarian violence, her "pollution" is assumed without discussion. Later in the novel, the fact that Sutara is considered to be sexually contaminated emerges when discussions of marriage are cut short by Subha's mother's euphemistic references to "other problems" (71) that would diminish her prospects for a good match. While there is no conclusive "evidence" that Sutara was sexually assaulted—she is found unconscious and described as "feverish" and "aching all over" in the days following the incident (10)—it appears that patriarchal fantasies are powerful enough to assume that this is the case unless proven otherwise.¹¹

Repeatedly, the gaps in Sutara's story are written for her. Community and state conflicts over what to do about/with her are resolved by casting her as a passive victim who has been polluted by a lustful Muslim Other, thus sealing her fate as an outcast. Sutara's failure to recall her experience with the Other and her "recovery" by the state but rejection by the community are represented through Devi's text as a loss that disrupts the perception of the present.

To a reader familiar with the *Ramayana*,¹² Devi's novel is easily recognizable as a retelling of the story of Rama's doubts concerning Sita's fidelity after her rescue from Ravana. Devi's novel makes a direct allusion to this aspect of the epic when Promode, Sutara's cousin, discusses his frustration over the treatment of women refugees with his friends. The differences between Sutara's situation and Sita's, however, are underscored by Promode and the events of Devi's narrative. While in Valmiki's well-known version of the story Sita offers to walk through fire to prove her faithfulness to Rama, in *The River Churning*, Sutara is unable to undergo a similar test of her purity. Her inability to remember the events of the attack on her family and herself absolutely precludes the possibility of deflecting the aspersions concerning her "honour" in this context.¹³ Similarly, as Promode points out, while Sita eventually asks Mother Earth to swallow her up in the ground, thus ending her exile, women like Sutara who survived the partition violence remain in exile until their deaths. Promode emphasizes the inescapable ostracism these women experience when he describes them as "entering the darkness of the underground" and eking out "a most precarious existence on the margins of society" (1995:118). Thus, while Devi's text resonates with this larger cultural narrative, it also subverts it by refusing to offer any conclusive "evidence" of Sutara's pollution or purity and by rejecting the idea of death and reincarnation as the ultimate solution to the women's traumatic experiences in this life.¹⁴

The absence of details regarding the violence that Sutara suffered returns throughout *The River Churning*, as flashbacks disrupt her perception of time and sense of belonging and underscore her inability to remember what happened that night. For example, when Sutara finally discusses the violence with her friend, Kaushalyavati, she realizes for the first time that she, her mother, and her sister may have also been the targets of sexual assault:

“What did they do with the women? Did your milkman tell you?” Scenes from that terrible night floated before her—the screams of Ma and didi, didi’s terror-stricken face. Now she understood the full import of it. (86)

Even with this added knowledge, Sutara’s flashbacks to the events leading up to her blackout become increasingly impressionistic and fragmented as she grows preoccupied with whether or not her family members are dead. For instance, Devi portrays Sutara as panicked when she accompanies a group from the college on a pilgrimage and is asked to participate in a Hindu ceremony where rice and water are made as offerings to relatives; when asked if her parents and siblings are alive, the narrative recounts:

Mother and father? She could hardly control her tears as scenes from the terrible night flitted across her mind.

Her voice shook as she asked, “Who shall I offer the water to? My mother, father and didi?” ... Still in a daze, Sutara wondered if her mother was actually dead. Did she die that night? Her death had not been reported. Tamij Saheb had informed her only of her father’s fate—nobody said anything about her mother and sister.... Sutara’s hands shook, she felt parched, she offered up her prayers though she did not understand any of the words she was made to utter. All she remembered were her middle-aged father’s last words, “Keep the door closed,” and his hurried exit into the dark night, her mother’s face in the flaming glow of the burning cowshed, the way her sister fell and shadowy figures invading the house. (111–12)

The relationships between language and referent, life and death, sight and knowledge are all thrown into question by this passage. The only things Sutara is certain of are her father’s last words and these four images: her father’s exit, her mother’s face, her sister’s fall, and the house being invaded by “shadowy figures.” However, the repetition of her father’s words, “Keep the door closed,” at this stage in the narrative now seems to refer to much more than the literal action of bolting the door. It has become a metonym for the patriarchal logic that sustains the discourse of contamination governing “abducted” women’s identities at the time, and that anticipates the gendered nature of the collective violence that unfolds and precipitates Sutara’s treatment by her extended family. At the time of the attack, Sutara does not understand why her father wants them to hide in the house. “But,” as Lyotard argues, “the silence imposed on knowledge does not impose the silence of forgetting, it imposes a feeling” (1988:56). “What is at stake in literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them” (13). The “trauma,” “loss as loss.” or “differend” to which Sutara’s forgetting points at this moment in the narrative—the “feeling” that “one cannot find the words”—seems to be explained by the idiom of this flash-

back. After being rejected by her extended family and community, Sutara comes to understand that the obscure events that unfolded outside her father's patriarchal protection are the cause of her misery. By surrendering to the silence in Sutara's story, the reader is alerted to what is effaced from modernist accounts of history in order to allow (masculine) Indian subjects to emerge as autonomous citizens—not the details of Sutara's violation but the ambiguity of their interpretation. The belief that Sutara was sexually assaulted by members of the other community and the subsequent shame associated with what is represented as the "defilement" of her purity provide the rationale that informs both her violation and her "recovery." By refusing to fill the gap in Sutara's story, Devi denies the reader "the evidence" needed to assess whether or not she was sexually polluted and points instead to the patriarchal rationale that informs the construction of women's sexuality as either contaminated or pure. Sutara's predicament deflects the categories that have been established to make sense of her experience in that the gap in her story makes her impossible to identify as a woman of honour or dishonour. It also becomes apparent that, in order to begin to understand how these categories have been constructed and normalized in the name of the nation, one must move outside of Devi's text and the terms in which these events have been interpreted in hegemonic historical accounts of partition.

My focus on the novel's remembrance of partition violence, therefore, meditates on the impossibility of anamnesis, "a practice that seeks the recovery of what has been lost, neglected, or misplaced" and suggests that "learning from the past" requires a practice of anagnorisis, a critical method of remembrance that disrupts the hold of patriarchal modernist views over this history. The gendered violence that Sutara experiences and the nation and community's attempts to forget or contain it are indicative of the identity of the modern nation-state as a site of representation which can only be shared by all citizens if it elides the ambivalences of their experiences.¹⁵ The ethics of my reading of *The River Churning*, therefore, locate the "abducted" or "polluted" migrant woman as an aporia in conservative nationalism by refusing to reconcile or "recover" her identity or experience within the script dictated by the community, state, or realist ideology. In the process, my reading discloses the slippage within the representative status implied by the concepts of the nation-state and the citizen-subject in modernist history and gestures at its gendered connotations. Rather than seeking to *restore* (or fill in the blanks of) the experiences of women refugees at the time of partition (the impulse characteristic of modern history that ultimately betrays or appropriates those experiences), my reading of Devi's text meditates on the absent presence of these details at the core of Sutara's story in order to consider other ways of knowing the history of this period. The autonomy of the nation is haunted by this fact that it would rather leave behind but cannot quite resolve. The silence at the core of "abducted" women's narratives should not, therefore, be resolved, accounted for, translated, or recovered; rather, this silence should be understood as a refusal to identify with the project of (patriarchal) modernity that has produced it in the first place.

Notes

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the fourteenth Annual South Asia Conference, University of California, Berkeley, in February 1999 and the Defining Colonies Conference: Third Conference on Colonialism, National University of Ireland, Galway, in June 1999. I am grateful for all the helpful comments I received from those audiences, as well as from various readers of this manuscript including Ritu Menon, Alok Bhalla, Teresa Heffernan, and Bart Simon.
2. Articles such as those by Menon and Bhasin (1993) and Butalia (1993) have laid the groundwork for more extended discussions of the implications of sectarian violence for constructions of community and state identities at the time of partition and over the last fifty-two years since India's and Pakistan's independence. Recently, a full issue of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* was dedicated to the topic of the partition of the Indian subcontinent.
3. I use the term "abducted" in scare quotes to emphasize the contested status of the identities of women who were separated from their families in the sectarian violence that unfolded at the time of partition. It is unclear whether all women separated from their families were taken and/or held against their will. To use this term without a degree of contingency would be to overlook how it is embedded in nationalist and patriarchal readings of Partition history.
4. The novel's title in Bengali is *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*. As Devi indicates in the "Author's Note," however, the original title under which she published the novel was *Itihasey Stree Parva*, or *The Woman Chapter in History*. *Stree Parva* refers to a chapter of the *Mahabharata* that details Arjun's failure to protect women left alone after the men of the Yadu clan are killed in battle. Devi notes: "Before his [Arjun's] very eyes, women were insulted and humiliated, some were forced to accompany the bandits out of fear, perhaps some were killed—the chronicler has not been able to give us a complete account" (1995:xxxiv). Obviously, Devi is drawing a parallel between the gaps in the *Mahabharata* regarding this history and the gaps in accounts of women separated from their male relatives during Partition. Indeed, the final chapter of her novel is titled "*Stree Parva*." While Devi speculates that the silence about these events in the *Mahabharata* may be linked to the fact that the poem's author, Vyasdev, was male, she also notes that, even if there were women epic poets, "they could hardly write the stories of their own dishonour and shame. The language for it has yet to be fashioned, so naturally *Stree Parva* does not figure anywhere" (1995:xxxv). As I argue in this paper, Devi's account of Sutara's experience with her extended family suggests that it is also impossible to write about women's experience of partition violence without lapsing into the vocabulary of dishonour and shame; thus, Devi refuses to provide a "conclusive" account of those events.
5. I follow Mario Di Paolantonio in placing "we" and "our" in quotation marks throughout my paper as a way of performing the paper's explicit view that the boundedness of any particular "we" is never an accomplished and given fact, as contradictions and permeations cut through its illusory homogenous image. Thus, the interface (the rhetorical encounter) between this illusory identification and metaethical language of the other does not take place *directly* in the empirical, rather it stages an *obligation in thought*—an encounter of the limits—which cannot be considered *purely* in constative or descriptive terms. (2000:181 n. 3)
6. The Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (R.S.S.) is considered a parent organization to the current ruling party in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.). Since its inception, the RSS has articulated and promoted a Hindu-centric notion of Indian identity.

7. While it could be argued that the testimonies given by survivors of partition violence vary depending on the context in which they are interviewed, attempts made to address these kinds of methodological difficulties have failed to produce any definitive version of one individual's experience of sectarian violence.
8. I have written about the gendered dynamic of these imposed silences in "Fragments of Imagination" (1997).
9. Bahri cites Cathy Caruth in her attempt to describe the effects of trauma as they are portrayed in *Cracking India*: "as Caruth points out, 'the traumatized person ... carries an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history they cannot entirely possess'" (1992:23). As I demonstrate, however, Caruth seems to abandon this understanding in her discussion of Lenny's relationship to Ayah's experience in the analysis that follows.
10. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* tells the story of a young Parsi girl, Lenny, growing up in Lahore in the period approaching India's independence and partition. The climax of the novel comes when Lenny's nanny, Ayah/Shanti, is taken prisoner by the mob led by her former friend and suitor, Ice-candy-man.
11. Later in the narrative, when Sutara returns to Pakistan to visit Tamij's family, Aziz, Tamij's son, recalls his own memories of the night her family home was attacked. He recounts how he and his father and brothers arrived *after* the attack when "there was not a soul in sight," mentioning that "Baba was looking for Sutara and the rest. Suddenly he saw a bundle of clothes lying in a pool of blood. He went near and found it was Sutara" (1995:100). While Aziz's mother would like Sutara to come and live with their family in Pakistan and marry one of her sons, Sutara, Aziz, and his brother all reject this idea, citing both the events of that evening and "Hindu-Muslim antagonisms" (102) as insurmountable barriers between them. Similarly, when Promode informs his mother of his desire to marry Sutara, her main objection is that "Nobody knows what actually went on there" (124).
12. The *Ramayana*, an epic poem composed in the third century by Valmiki, depicts the life of Rama, including the story of his search for his wife, Sita, who is abducted by Ravana, the evil king of Lanka.
13. K.S. Srinivas translates Valmiki and Kampan's versions of this incident in the *Ramayanam* as follows:
- Eyes, downcast, Sita walked around Rama and went up to the fire. With folded hands she swore, "If my heart can never stray away from Rama, may this fire—eternal witness—grant me full redemption," and in total detachment she entered the flaming fire.... As Bhrama spoke, Agni the fire-god emerged with Sita on his lap, unscathed. Handing her over to Rama, Agni said, "this is your Vaidehi, free of fault not by word or thought nor even look." (1994:276)
14. Though Promode's proposal to marry Sutara (which comes at the end of the novel) seems to restore her to the domestic sphere of the nation, this sense of closure can still be read against the grain. Sutara's marriage to Promode comes at a time when he is planning to leave the country. Thus, while Promode's proposal returns Sutara from exile in her own so-called homeland, it is only a partial return. Promode appears to propose the marriage out of a combined sense of affection and guilt for how his family and nation have treated Sutara. As though his plans to live as an expatriate allow him to make the ultimate patriotic sacrifice; as a son of the nation planning to live in exile, he marries Sutara and removes her from the nation rather than directly challenging her treatment by the state and community. In this light, the novel's multiple references to a composite Hindu-Muslim culture (references that foreground the influence of Muslim culture in India, such as the location of Sutara's college in Old Delhi

near the Red Fort and the scene of Promode's proposal to Sutara in the Qudsia gardens, named after one of the Mogul emperor Aurangzeb's Begums) serve only to underscore the irony of Sutara's treatment by her extended family.

15. It is here that my thoughts intersect with what Chakrabarty has described as the project of "provincializing Europe" (1992:22). This project proposes a displacement of a hyper-real Europe, which Chakrabarty argues has occupied the centre of historical imagination, in favour of "a history that deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices" (1992:23).

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