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NARRATING TRAUMA, CONSTRUCTING BINARIES: PARTITION IN MUSLIM WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

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Nearly twenty years on from Urvashi Butalia's game-changing *The Other Side of Silence* (1998), Partition historiography – by which I mean the body of historical writing addressing the Partition and Independence of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 – looks very different than it did before. The statistics inevitably used to open these accounts have changed little: around twelve million refugees, one million dead from slaughter, malnutrition and disease, 75,000 women abducted and raped, thousands of families divided by new borders drawn on a map to represent the newly-independent nations of India and Pakistan.[1] But, whereas earlier generations of historians sought to understand Partition primarily in terms of the 'high politics' that facilitated the transfer of power, now we can appreciate the impact of that event – or perhaps better, process – on the lives of 'ordinary people'.[2] Historiographical trends that hit Indian history-writing more generally in the early 1980s leading to the creation of Subaltern Studies permeated this discourse a few years later to create a 'new' history of Partition 'from below'. The catalysts were many: renewed communal violence in India associated with the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the Gujarat riots in 2002 alongside the golden and diamond jubilees of Independence in 1997 and 2007 primarily.[3] Debates on ethnic

[1] Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998), 3.
[2] For a concise overview of these shifts in Partition historiography, see Pippa Virdee, 'Remembering Partition: Women, Oral Histories and the Partition of 1947', *Oral History* 41:2 (Autumn 2013): 49-53.
[3] Butalia identifies the events of 1984 especially, but also 1992, as inspiring her own study (*The Other Side of Silence*, 4-7), as does Gyanendra Pandey in *Remembering Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University 2001), x.

cleansing and sectarian conflict elsewhere in the world – from Bosnia to Iraq – also figured in this story.[4] Butalia's insistence that we think of Partition as 'one of the great *human* convulsions of history' has given rise to a Partition historiography with a *human* face.[5]

The feminist commitment that infused not just Butalia's effort, but also Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders & Boundaries*, published in the same year, has placed women, gender and sexuality at the heart of this 'new' history of Partition.[6] Women, it became clear, had experienced Partition in a unique way, not least because their bodies had been 'singled out' as 'privileged sites of violence': for rape, abduction, mutilation, murder and suicide.[7] The 'honour' of the family/community/nation became invested in women such that they bore the brunt of Partition's 'most horrific crimes', even as they may have colluded in them too: in its most extreme form, a type of 'femicide' given validation as 'honour killings'.[8] In the aftermath, patriarchal families joined interests with a patriarchal state to reclaim 'its' women, restoring abducted women's sanctity by passing judgement on their sexual 'purity' – a process of rehabilitation in which many female relief workers played a key role. Women thus came to represent 'something more than ordinary individuals'; they were 'sacred to the people'.[9] The function of women, gender and sexuality in these analyses, then, was not simply to 'supplement more orthodox historiography', to quote Suvir Kaul, but rather to demonstrate its 'constitutive centrality': how it 'interrogates and

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As examples of the historiographical clustering around an independence jubilee, see Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); and Ian Talbot, *Divided Cities: Partition and Its Aftermath in Lahore and Amritsar 1947-1957* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[4] For these parallels, see Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 63; and Karan Mahajan, 'A People's History of Partition', *New York Sun* (10 October 2007) [http://www.nysun.com/arts/peoples-history-of-partition/64254/]

[5] Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 3. Italics added.

[6] Bhasin and Menon, *Borders and Boundaries*.

[7] Jill Didur, *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006, 7

[8] Pippa Virdee, 'Negotiating the Past: Journey through Muslim Women's Experience of Partition and Resettlement in Pakistan', *Cultural and Social History* 6:4 (2009), 469.

[9] Virdee, 'Negotiating the Past', 471-2.

rewrites the narratives'.[10] To understand the 'story of 1947' as a 'gendered narrative' was to overturn binary constructions of 'public' and 'private', 'victims' and 'heroes', that infused nationalist and communitarian discourses.[11]

At the same time, what these accounts often neglected were the particular experiences of Muslim women. Butalia, for instance, makes extensive use of Anis Kidwai's well-known Partition memoir, *Azadi ki Chhaon Main*, on working with refugees and abducted women in the uncertain and often violent environs of Delhi between September 1947 and June 1948.[12] But she otherwise recognises that her study has a 'major lacuna' in that it is 'one-sided': relating only to the Partition of Punjab through the use of Indian documents and interviews.[13] Her own critique of her own work is one applicable to Partition's 'new history' more generally. As Pippa Virdee notes, it is 'predominately Indian-centric' and focused on the 'plight of Punjabis'. While the latter may be appropriate if gauging the 'worst of the atrocities', it results in a historiography that is, in her own words, 'geographically limited'.[14] Increasingly, these limitations are being overcome. A starting point perhaps was Gyanendra Pandey's recognition in *Remembering Partition* (2001) of the 'third' Partition by which, soon after the 'official' Partition, refugees began flooding into Delhi and the United Provinces especially.[15] The Partition stories of refugees and families

[10] Suvir Kaul (ed.), *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 10.
[11] Bhasin and Menon, *Borders and Boundaries*, 9; Urvashi Butalia, 'Community, State, and Gender: Some Reflections on the Partition of India' in *Inventing Boundaries: Gender, Politics and the Partition of India*, ed. Mushirul Hasan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 203-4.
[12] Anis Kidwai's *Azadi ki Chhaon Main* was originally published in Urdu in 1974 (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1974), transliterated into Hindi (the version Butalia uses) by Noor Nabi Abbasi in 1978 (Delhi:National Book Trust, 1978) and, most recently, translated into English by Ayesha Kidwai as *In Freedom's Shade* (Delhi: Penguin, 2011). For examples of how it is employed, see Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 146-47, 259-61, 302-3. It is also key evidence in her 'Community, State, and Gender'.
[13] Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 22.
[14] Virdee, 'Remembering Partition', 52. On Punjab's Partition, see Ian Talbot and D.S. Tatla, *Epicentre of Violence: Partition Voices and Memories from Amritsar* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006); and Ishtiaq Ahmed, *The Punjab Bloodied, Partitioned and Cleansed* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[15] Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 35-9.

divided in Delhi and Karachi have since attracted growing attention.[16] Bengal, overlooked for some time on the assumption that Partition's impact was somehow less significant there, has also come into the frame, particularly through Joya Chatterji's study of the specific political negotiations, migration patterns and economic ruptures of 1947 and after.[17]

Partition is thus coming to be explored as a historical happening pertinent not just to Punjab or even Punjab and Bengal – but, still, the Indian-centricity persists, even among feminist scholars. The effect is that less than a handful of authors have focused on 1947's memories and meanings from the perspective of Pakistani women or, more broadly, Muslim women in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Several explanations are offered for Muslim women's 'virtual anonymity' in Partition historiography.[18] For Indian researchers who pioneered the field, the matter is largely practical: relevant historical subjects and sources are understood to be located primarily on the 'other side' of the border. Butalia, for instance, explains that, as an Indian citizen, she had 'no access to information, interviews or anything else from Pakistan'; only researchers from a 'third country' could get permission to consult Partition documents and memories across South Asia.[19] The importance of contact is underscored by Uma Chakravarti: only after teaching a women's studies course in Lahore was she inspired to think about Partition from the 'standpoint' of Pakistani women on the

[16] Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947: Partition Narratives Among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Vaizra Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (Delhi: Penguin, 2007).
[17] Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). On Partition from the perspective of Bengali Muslims, see Neilesh Bose, *Recasting the Region: Language, Culture and Islam in Colonial Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014). On the Partition experiences of women in Bengal is Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (Calcutta: Bhatkal and Sen, 2003).
[18] I borrow this observation from Rabia Umar Ali, 'Muslim Women and the Partition of India: A Historiographical Silence', *Islamic Studies* 48:3 (Autumn 2009): 428.
[19] Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 22.

'other side'.[20] Others highlight cultural limitations connected to *izzat* and *sharam*, honour and shame, considered more prevalent in Muslim South Asia. In an article lamenting the 'historiographical silence' on Muslim women and Partition, Rabia Umar Ali points to 'patriarchal constraints and societal norms' that have made it 'taboo' for Muslim women especially to divulge stories that may include rape, abduction and forced conversion.[21]

How, then, to recover Muslim women's voices that have remained marginalised even after the turn in Partition historiography to 'ordinary lives'? Following Butalia's lead, many scholars favour oral testimony for its 'ability to empower those unexpressed utterances' – in this case, the 'silent history' of Muslim women's Partition – that would 'otherwise remain undocumented.'[22] Notable here is Pippa Virdee's work based on targeted interviews in Pakistan's west Punjab. A 'locality based approach' – by which she pursued 'multiple interviews in a geographically tight space' in and around Ludhiana and Lyallpur – provided a 'glimpse' into the 'lived experiences' of Muslim women, including the illiterate, the less privileged and the rural. At the same time, it flagged up ethical and methodological concerns: the responsibility of the interviewer for 'constructing and creating an account' based on traumatic, often buried or forgotten memories.[23] The difficulty of actually interviewing women who have been 'conditioned to feel they have little value to contribute to society' is also highlighted. Particularly in male company, women proved reluctant to talk, partly because the memories were still too raw to be expressed and partly because they could not conceive of their experiences or memories as having worth.[24] Her

[20] Uma Chakravarti, 'Betrayal, Anger, and Loss: Women Write the Partition in Pakistan' in *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance and Autobiography in South Asia*, ed. Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 123.
[21] Ali, 'Muslim Women and the Partition of India', 428.
[22] Virdee, 'Remembering Partition', 53; and Virdee, ' Negotiating the Past', 467.
[23] Virdee, 'Remembering Partition', 53-4.
[24] Virdee, 'Remembering Partition', 55-6.

observations remind us of Gayatri Spivak's probing of whether the subaltern woman can actually 'speak' in any meaningful sense when proscribed by a patriarchal discourse that defines what she may say, do and even think.[25]

Recognising these constraints, other scholars have employed fiction, primarily in the form of novels, poetry and film, to examine Muslim women's experiences of Partition. An early effort was Mushirul Hasan's reading of Attia Hosain's well-known Partition novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), as 'one of the most compelling *archives* of Muslim experience before, during, and after partition.'[26] His treatment of novels as 'historical texts' justifies Jill Didur's observation that early commentators tended to overlook how Partition literature was a 're-presenting', rather than a 'documenting', of violence in particular. Her corrective when reading *Sunlight* is to follow Kaul in encouraging a more 'vigilant or critical reading' in which the 'discursive construction of subjectivity, agency, nationalism and history' are understood as part of the 'narrativization'.[27] For Antoinette Burton, who also tackles Hosain's novel, Partition literature can thus be 'reimagined' as a 'dwelling place' of 'legitimate historical practice' by scrutinizing it for its 'forms and fictions': the ways in which memories are structured, articulated and materialized.[28] Accordingly, the aforementioned Chakravarti analyses three Partition novels composed by female authors in Pakistan: Mumtaz Shah Nawaz's *The Heart Divided* (1948), Khadija Mastur's *Aangan* (1952) and Zaheda Hina's *Na Junoon Raha Na Pari Rahi* (1996). Her starting point is to recognise that,

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[25] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 66-111, especially 90.

[26] Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims since Independence* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 62. This description is applied to Hasan's work by Antoinette Burton in her *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 106. Italics added.

[27] Didur, 'Introduction: Unsettling Partition', 5-6. Also see her ch. 4: 'A Heart Divided: Education, Romance and the Domestic Sphere in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*', 94-124. For the original quote from Kaul, see *The Partitions of Memory*, 13.

[28] Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*, 102.

though these novels are not autobiographical in a 'strict sense', they enable women to 'speak for a larger feminine self beyond personal experience'. Through the protagonists, the writings 'speak back' to her of a Partition defined for Muslim women as a group by anger, loss and nostalgia.[29]

Another form of Partition literature identified, but rarely explored for the purpose of recovering *individual*, as well as *collective*, Muslim women's voices is autobiography. As an example, Ali lists a handful of male and female authors whose autobiographical 'outpourings of their experience have lent expression to many silent voices' – but fails to tell us more.[30] Similarly, five of the twelve authors or interviewees extracted in Ritu Menon's edited collection, *No Woman's Land* (2004), are Muslim women from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, but there is only cursory analysis of their contributions in the short introduction.[31] In fact, there is a plethora of autobiographical writings by South Asian Muslim women, including memoirs, travelogues and short journal articles, both published and unpublished, in which to explore the theme of Partition from their unique perspective. In particular, this body of material published from 1947 onwards enables analysis of how Partition memories are constructed in relation to gender, class and community at different historical moments and locations. Of particular interest, as suggested by my title, is autobiography's cathartic function for narrating trauma, but also the selective deployment of silences as a means of dealing with pain and complicity. Other major themes include the creation of binaries between self and other, assertions of victimhood and agency, and the role of rumour in remembrance.

[29] Chakravarti, 'Betrayal, Anger and Loss', 123.
[30] Ali, 'Muslim Women and the Partition of India', 433.
[31] The authors and interviewees include Sara Suleri, Ismat Chughtai, Shehla Shibli, Anees Kidwai and Hasna Saha. On their contributions in the introduction, see Ritu Menon (ed.), *No Woman's Land: Women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh Write on the Partition of India* (Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004), 4, 8-10.

The assumed requirement for literacy to produce autobiography means most Muslim female authors of autobiography are, in general terms, 'elites' within South Asia's complex social hierarchy: upper or middle-class, *sharif* of the old sort or new. Most were not just educated, but educated to the degree level and beyond – an accreditation that meant they often pursued an occupation when few women and even fewer elite Muslim women did. Their jobs varied, but by far the majority were educationalists, writers, politicians and performers.[32] When compared to oral testimony as a source, it means less social variation, admittedly: female authors of South Asian autobiography rarely go beyond what Virdee calls 'more accessible, educated and urban voices'.[33] Saying that, the cast of characters that they depict, including servants, students, clients, audiences and voters, often do. Autobiographies also offer insight into Partition experiences beyond one locality or region. Authors from both Punjab and Bengal can be considered alongside those from other Muslim centres in South Asia, including Aligarh, Rampur, Bhopal and Hyderabad, thus enabling some discussion of the regional specificities of Partition experiences and memories.[34] Moreover, autobiographies can disclose the construction of memories unmediated by a researcher or fictional lens.[35] To get a sense of the complexity of themes within this rich body of Partition literature by Muslim women, let us turn in the remainder of this chapter to a case study.

Chosen for close analysis is an autobiographical account of Partition by a Bengali Muslim woman named Jobeda Khanam (1920-90). Her autobiography, *Jiban Khatar*

[32] This summary is based on ch. 2: 'The Sociology of Authorship' in my forthcoming monograph, *The Ultimate Unveiling: Gender, Autobiography and the Self in Muslim South Asia*.
[33] Virdee, 'Remembering Partition', 56.
[34] On where Muslim women writing autobiography were located in geographical terms, see ch. 3: 'The Autobiographical Map' in my *The Ultimate Unveiling*.
[35] That is not to deny the role of an editor or ghost writer. On the part played by these external figures in constructing autobiography, see ch. 4: 'Staging the Self' in my *The Ultimate Unveiling*.

Pataguli [Pages from my life], was published only in Bengali by a press in Dhaka in 1991.[36] Its circulation appears to have been fairly limited outside Bangladesh despite the author's earlier fiction, including short stories and children's books, garnering some attention.[37] Nonetheless, it represents a wider proliferation of autobiographical writing by Bangladeshi women from the 1980s – with more than 40 authors producing life stories of various types over a thirty-year period.[38] Like many of these women, Jobeda wrote at the end of her life to capture the many political and social changes that she had experienced. As one near-contemporary, Khatenamara Begam (born *c.* 1923-24), summarised:

> We – I mean, people of my age group – have seen all three ages (past, present and future). The first 23/24 years of our lives were under the mighty British colonizers; our youth was spent in a lot of confusion and struggle under Pakistan; and our mature years passed in difficulty as independent citizens of Bangladesh. Today, at the end of my life when I see the past, I see we have crossed many strong waves over many years. We have seen epoch-making political changes. We have gathered many different and strange experiences. With great excitement, I have seen the great changes that have taken place in the field of women's education and her social environment.[39]

For Jobeda, too, living through these 'three ages' motivated autobiographical reflection.

The author's social and educational background also made her representative of

[36] Jobeda Khanam, *Jiban Khatar Pataguli* (Dhaka: Kathamala Prakashani, 1991). I am extremely grateful to Sarmistha Gupta with whom I worked in Delhi to prepare translations from the text.
[37] An example of her short story collections widely available in North American university libraries is: Jobeda Khanam, *Ekati Surera Mrtyu* (Dhaka: Adila Bradarsa, 1974). Her writing for children is addressed in: Peter Hunt (ed.), *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, vol. I (London: Routledge, 2004, 2nd ed.), 1087. Other writings include: *Ananta Pipasa* (Dhaka: Naoroja Kitabistana, 1967); *Chotadera Ekankika* (Dhaka: Bangla Ekadami, 1963); and *Mahasamudra* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Shishu Academy, 1977).
[38] I discuss this proliferation in ch. 2 and ch. 3 of my *The Ultimate Unveiling*.
[39] Khatemanara Begam, 'Nari Shiksha: Ami Ja Dekhechhi' in Nurunnahar Faizunnessa (ed.), *Kaler Samukh Bhela* (Dhaka: Muktodhara, 1988), 70.

Muslim women writing autobiography in the twentieth century. Born in 1920 in the small town of Kushtia – then in colonial Bengal's Nadia district, but now in southwest Bangladesh – her childhood experiences were framed by a fairly affluent extended family that practiced strict seclusion (*purdah*). Though her grandfather was a respected local *pir* (or spiritual guide), her father, as a younger son, had been sent to school and then college to receive a 'modern' education that would facilitate access to the colonial bureaucracy. Duly, he landed a 'very big' job as sub-inspector in the Education Department that meant his immediate family often moved to different postings within colonial Bengal. While in Basirhat (now in West Bengal), Jobeda's father was pressured by Muslim friends to send his daughter to a local purdah school, but, as she was nearly eleven, he demurred on the basis that she was of marriageable age. Still, he recognised her desire to learn by teaching her the rudiments of Bengali and mathematics at home. Only after her marriage at the age of thirteen to a westernised 'gentleman' from Calcutta over twenty years her senior did she begin to study in earnest, passing her matriculation examination five years later. Ultimately, she pursued education to the Master's level and beyond, even going abroad in the 1950s to study at the University of London and the University of Kentucky.[40]

Midway through her published autobiography, Jobeda paused to reflect consciously on the process of writing her life at the age of seventy years old when her memories were no longer 'sharp'. As she explained of her narrative: 'It is from my memory and thus not a continuous history. The memories that come to my mind are just jotted down. That is why sometimes I write things that have happened later and sometimes things that have happened earlier. Many things I do not remember in sequence. Many things I remember

[40] This biographical summary is based on the first half of Jobeda Khanam's *Jiban Khatar Pataguli*, especially pp. 1-28, 43, 88-9.

very clearly, but I do not remember their dates and years.'[41] Her frank observation calls to mind academic analyses under the rubric of 'memory studies' by which individual recollections, as contained in oral histories or autobiographies, are characterised as 'unstable', 'shifting', even 'whimsical'.[42] At the same time, it evokes a fragmentary quality so often identified with women's writing by which their autobiographies in particular are seen to resist chronology and construction.[43] The process of writing – by which memories were just 'jotted' down – becomes inscribed on a text free of chapter breaks or a proper conclusion. The abrupt end to the text may, in fact, be a result of the author's death mid-composition. Certainly, the book was published posthumously.

Nevertheless, *Jiban Khatar Pataguli* is roughly chronological with the main section on Partition appearing as part of a wider discussion of the author's struggle to attain educational qualifications after 1939. That watershed moment is defined, not by the outbreak of World War II, but by her husband's premature death from typhoid that left her a widow with two young children at the age of just eighteen. Unwilling to return to her natal home where she would be a 'burden' on others, she sought employment as a teacher that would allow her to provide for her children while pursuing higher education.[44] Her narration thus moves from the process of completing her I.A. and B.A. in the early 1940s against a backdrop of war and famine to her return to Calcutta in 1946 – aged around 26 years – to pursue formal teaching training (B.T.). That Jobeda retained her links to her native district of Nadia in central Bengal – soon to be partitioned in 1947 – underlines the

[41] Ibid., 87.
[42] I draw here on the analysis of 'Gender, Performance, and Memory' by Anshu Malhotra and myself in our Introduction to *Speaking of the Self*, especially 18.
[43] For a summary of the 'difference' theory of women's autobiography, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 'Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices' in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 18
[44] Jobeda Khanam, *Jiban Khatar Pataguli*, 44.

autobiography's status as 'memories from the border' in line with this volume's wider intention.[45] Subsequent to this core passage, Partition reappears frequently as a marker of time 'before' or 'after' which politics or culture or government operated according to one strict imperative or another. The author's telling of later episodes of violence as East Pakistan transmuted into Bangladesh – including during the Language Movement that reached its peak in 1952 and the 1971 war resulting in independence – encourages reflection on how her Partition memories may have been inflected through that lens.

Of particular note is that Jobeda Khanam begins the passage on Partition proper with a nationalist trope: that, 'before the troubles', there had been communal harmony in Bengal with Hindus and Muslims united in their opposition to the British and their Indian collaborators in the police force. The 'binary formulation' that she creates here between 'idyllic cohabitation' on one hand and 'antagonism and violence' on the other, to borrow Mahua Sarkar's descriptors, is somewhat belied by the author's own telling of intercommunal relations in her childhood.[46] We may consider here, as example, a passage early in the text in which Jobeda describes making a 'special friend' of a neighbour girl, Lolita, while living in the Hindu-majority Krishnanagar district. The poor girl ended up 'beaten black and blue' for letting a 'Muchalman' – a derogatory term for Muslim – spoil a room of foodstuffs with her touch when she came to play. As Jobeda introduces the anecdote: 'We' – read, Muslims – 'were always worried that we would create ritual pollution by touching them' – read, Hindus – 'or their things.' Because Jobeda's father was the inspector and Lolita's father the headmaster of the local school, no one from Lolita's

[45] On Nadia's 'demographic contours' as a 'border district', see Subhasri Ghosh, 'Population Movement in West Bengal: A Case Study of Nadia District, 1947-1951', *South Asia Research* 34:2 (2014): 113-32.
[46] Mahua Sarkar, 'Changing Together, Changing Apart: Urban Muslim and Hindu Women in Pre-Partition Bengal', *History & Memory* 27:1 (Spring/Summer 2015): 5-42. The quotation is from p. 9.

family dared to 'scold' Jobeda – but 'at home I was slapped for going to their house'.[47] The apparent 'conviviality' of pre-Partition Bengal is thus brought into tension, even in a context of complex status hierarchies.[48]

To evoke a past peace before intercommunal violence engulfed Bengali society thus offers a moment for nostalgia in the text, but not one that is readily sustained. Indeed, in narrating Partition, the author moves immediately back to a position of creating strict binaries between 'self' and 'other' – with 'self' as Muslim and 'other' as Hindu. As she writes: 'Congress was the united force of Hindus and Muslims. In unity, everybody fought against the British. But when the Muslims saw that Hindus were only working for their own welfare, then the Muslims established the Muslim League…'[49] Once set, the subsuming of individuals into groups defined by religious community (in the case of Indians) or nation (in the case of Britons) is sustained throughout. Hence, she writes that, after the horror in Calcutta that signified Direct Action Day in August 1946, 'the Hindus, the Muslims and the British had almost agreed to the fact of Partition'.[50] A more accurate telling of the delicate political negotiations that signified this shift may have referenced, as above, the Indian National Congress or the All-India Muslim League or even the British *rulers* or *government*. But, in Jobeda's retrospective telling, political groupings were synonymous with community.

What she suggests, however, is that the discord between these groups was not necessarily innate in a way focal to more antagonistic versions of the 'two nations theory'. On the contrary, it was created by Hindu majoritarianism and exclusion both at an individual and a more general level. So, still narrating events of 1946, Jobeda records that she had some difficulty gaining entrance to David Hare Training College for her teacher training

[47] Jobeda Khanam, *Jiban Khatar Pataguli*, 20-1.
[48] I draw here again on Sarkar, 'Changing Together', 17.
[49] Jobeda Khanam, *Jiban Khatar Pataguli*, 51.
[50] Ibid., 62.

because the principal, a Mr. K.D. Ghosh, did not want to give her entry and the 'three Muslim professors' did not stand up for her. Only by calling on 'Suhrawardy Sahib' no less – the Muslim League politician then premier of Bengal with whom she had cultivated a connection since 1940 – was she able to gain access. Even then, as the only 'Muslim woman' among just four or five 'Muslim students' in the whole school, she lived in an otherwise 'Hindu' hostel in a Hindu-dominated area of the city (on Hungerford Street in Ballygunge). Significant are the taunts she reports having received from a 'Hindu girl': 'why did you hurry to get admitted here? When Pakistan is created you could go there and get admitted easily.' According to Jobeda's own telling, her response was the following: 'I could not help but answer her ridicule. I told her – the day Pakistan is created, I will go there. Now, Pakistan is mixed with India, so we have our own rights here.'[51]

Later in this same section, the author reports in a similar vein: 'Our movement for another country was very irritating to Hindu society. They behaved as if India was theirs. They would not let India be divided. One day a quarrel broke out between me and two of my Hindu class mates during which one commented that Suhrawardy and Jinnah were traitors. I got extremely angry. I said very forcefully that your whole Hindu society is a traitor. You all want to keep the Muslims as your servants. That is why Jinnah and Suhrawardy fight against this.'[52] This anecdote, read alongside the previous one, offers offer a clear sense of how, from the sympathetic location of late twentieth century Bangladesh at the least, Jobeda conceived of 'Muslims' as an underclass in pre-partition India being pushed out by 'Hindus'. At the same time, these passages are highly revealing of her own agency: Muslims may be victims, but she is willing to talk and to act. Even when 'scared for our lives', she would do 'daring things': put a vermillion dot on her forehead and

[51] Ibid., 52.
[52] Ibid., 53.

a *shankha*, or conch-shell bangle, on her wrist so that, in the disguise of a married Hindu woman, she could buy books on College Street or visit her relatives.[53] She also writes at length about her eager participation in various meetings and processions, as well as her work in the relief camps after the riots.[54]

Of course, it is significant that she did the latter work, not just as a matter of political conviction or philanthropy, but also to gain the wage necessary to pay for schooling, accommodation and food for her and her children. Some of the most inspirational passages in *Jiban Khatar Pataguli* are those in which Jobeda narrates how, throughout 1946 and early 1947, she would teach in the morning and then go to college in the afternoon before working in the relief camps in the evening, all the while making arrangements for her children's schooling and care.[55] Included in this section is a revealing quotation attributed to an associate, Anwara Begam, who was then a Muslim League parliamentarian. She supported Jobeda when she was trying to acquire another teaching job at a Muslim girls' high school in Park Circus in central Calcutta by lambasting the reluctant principal: 'A Muslim girl is fighting to stand on her own two feet and you will not help her.'[56] Ultimately, Jobeda was granted employment, indicating how Partition could offer opportunities to those women seeking to take them. And yet it would be problematic to read women's agency here as an unequivocal good. As Jobeda puts it: 'I got the job. I got the job, but I did not have any rest from morning to night.'[57]

Furthermore, women's agency can also be located in their collusion in violence. A number of incidents narrated by the author – about others, if not herself – point to how

[53] Ibid., 62.
[54] Ibid., 53, 60-2.
[55] Ibid., 60.
[56] Ibid., 60.
[57] Ibid., 60.

women were responsible for providing their menfolk with weapons with which to fight, primarily in the form of domestic objects like kitchen knives. As Jobeda writes about Direct Action Day: 'The riot started. But how would Muslims fight?... If I had not seen it with my own eyes I would not have believed it. I saw women giving their men anything they could find for the men to fight with.'[58] She also depicts Muslim women of differing classes as responsible for spurring on their sons to fight and die. Consider the following passage as illustrative example: 'I remember one lady very clearly. She was the mother of a rickshaw puller. She touched her heart and said – "This is our jihad. Nobody can destroy the Muslims. To defend the honour of the Muslims, my son will give his life." The fire I saw in that thin woman's eyes on that day, I still remember clearly to this day.'[59] These anecdotes confound one of the oft-perpetuated 'myths' of Partition violence that it was 'largely male' with women as the 'victims of violence, not its perpetrators, not its agents'.[60] According to Butalia, these narratives 'contained and circumscribed' women's 'potential for violence' to keep them within an 'ordained boundary' that defined them as 'non-violent'.[61] As a Muslim, a Bangladeshi and an independent woman, Jobeda had no such compunction.

Nevertheless, there is still a strong undercurrent of victimhood and trauma in *Jiban Khatar Pataguli*. The author, for instance, reports the intense fear that she experienced in the days following Direct Action Day during which she ended up hiding, separated from her children, in the offices of the *Millat* newspaper with a number of other single Muslim women. Though they had no bedding, food or bathing facilities, their greatest distress came from the night sounds: 'In the dead of night, we could hear different kinds of noises. Jai Hind, Jai Hind, Allah Ho Akbar, Allah Ho Akbar. Every noise stopped our heart beating. Even

[58] Ibid., 56.
[59] Ibid., 55.
[60] Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 169
[61] Jobeda Khanam, *Jiban Khatar Pataguli*, 170-1.

the water that trickled down the tap sounds like Jai Hind, Jai Hind… How would we be safe?'[62] They begged for poison only to be reassured by male Muslim leaders: 'We will not let our daughters fall into their hands.'[63] We may conjecture that her experience of living through the equally traumatic circumstances of the 1971 independence struggle – during which so many Bengali women and girls were, in her own telling, 'butchered' and 'humiliated' by 'cruel Pakistani soldiers' – may have reinvigorated and framed these earlier memories.[64] The young woman that she was in 1946 could only have imagined what may have happened to her if the offices were attacked; after 1971, she knew through personal observation, the experiences of friends and family, and, notably, rumour how women could be raped, murdered and dismembered.

The author also recounts in very explicit terms the specific horrors that she observed during Partition, particularly when travelling through Calcutta in a government car under police protection to her exams in July and August of 1947: one foot stuck out of a bag on the side of the road, a headless body hanging from a tree. On the latter occasion, she reports being so disturbed that she vomited in the car before breaking into a howl in the examination hall.[65] Other tragedies were not observed, but 'heard' as rumours or news stories: how people were tied, like cattle, then thrown over bridges, how others were torn in half by their legs or burnt to 'coal', how naked women with their breasts sliced off were left abandoned on the road. Faced with photographs taken by a reporter friend, she again began to 'howl'.[66] These passages point to how autobiography may take on a therapeutic function: as a means of coming to terms with past trauma by articulating and thus

[62] Ibid., 57-8.
[63] Ibid., 58.
[64] Ibid., 124, 125, 129.
[65] Ibid., 63-4.
[66] Ibid., pp 79-80.

containing it.[67] Jobeda herself notes that, after Partition, she tried to 'forget everything' and 'feel at peace': 'But that did not happen'.[68] Unable to suppress the memories – especially in a political context where ongoing violence meant they were constantly being invoked – she appears to have turned instead to writing the pain as form of catharsis. Yet it is noteworthy that she is neither perpetrator, nor victim in these accounts – and she remains silent as to the identities of both.

Elsewhere, there are just a few occasions on which the reader may glimpse at fractures in the strict binaries created by the author between 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'. A representative passage is that in which she describes how, after the riots following Direct Action Day, she returned to her hostel to be so warmly received her relieved friend Aruna and the other 'Hindu' girls.[69] There are also several ruptures in the author's portrayal of 'Muslims' as a group. For instance, she chooses to include anecdotes about how certain Muslims – from the rickshawallahs in Dhaka to a later Minister in the Pakistan government – sought to take advantage of Partition's chaos for their own economic gain.[70] Her inclusion of these incidents problematises her earlier claim that, during Partition, 'all Muslims wanted to help each other.'[71] Jobeda also points to how Muslim rioters were 'those we considered as goons' – in other words, just thugs, whether they were Muslim or not.[72] Even more revealing are the differences that she highlights between 'fellow Muslims' once they found themselves in the new Pakistan. There, refugees from west Bengal and others, like herself,

[67] The best analysis of trauma's place in contemporary memoir is Leigh Gilmore's *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).
[68] Jobeda Khanam, *Jiban Khatar Pataguli*, 80.
[69] Ibid., 59.
[70] Ibid., 61-2.
[71] Ibid., 60.
[72] Ibid., 55.

who had spent time in cosmopolitan Calcutta pursuing education were ostracised by locals. As she writes: 'We had the air of being foreigners in our ways and the way we talked.'[73]

Notable is the significance of women to these discourses of difference, whether between Hindus and Muslims or Calcutta Muslims and Dhaka Muslims. The author notes, for instance, how the 'goons' referred to above participated in the violence on the claim of taking 'revenge' on those who have 'disrespected our mothers and sisters'.[74] There are other references to women's 'honour' too: how girls sought to escape the riots 'with their honour in tact', how rioters promised to protect 'their daughters', how girls could not escape the 'lustful looks' as they waited at Sealdah railway station to go to Dhaka.[75] But honour, or *izzat*, as a concept is actually evoked far less than one may expect from existing Partition literature.[76] On the contrary, Jobeda appears to make only passing reference to honour, seemingly as a token explanation drawing on a wider discourse – but without it being a matter of real significance to her own remembrance of Partition in Calcutta.

Indeed, where the issue of women's honour appears with much greater clarity in the text is on the author's arrival in Dhaka shortly after Partition proper – at which point differences between migrants and locals became epitomised by their attitudes to veiling practices in particular. Consider, as example, the following anecdote: 'One day a funny incident occurred. A lady and I were walking towards the radio office. All of a sudden two men came and stood in front of us. One of them looked at us angrily and said, "Look, this is Pakistan – a country of the Muslims. Walking shamelessly like this will not be tolerated here." My friend stood firm and said, "In which law of Pakistan is this written? Just show me that. If we do not listen to you, what will you do? Beat us? Will you be able to beat women?

[73] Ibid., 69.
[74] Ibid., 55.
[75] Ibid., 55, 58, 65.
[76] Butalia, for instance, dedicates an entire chapter to 'Honour' in *The Other Side of Silence*, 137-94.

I will go to the radio station now, and then I will go to the market. Let me see what you all can do."'[77] As the passage suggests, by this point in the narrative Jobeda and her 'lady' friend had found new employment in Dhaka working for the local radio station. They, like many other women who had come from Calcutta, were unveiled, highly educated and economically independent. For the men on the street, the honour of Pakistan as a new nation was invested in 'its' women – but Jobeda makes clear that their vision was contested: that she and other women would not be reduced to symbols that divested them of agency.

This observations may lead us, in conclusion, to ask how Partition was defined for this particular Bengali Muslim woman. Certainly, it was by a whole range of emotions. The first was a sense of loss: the loss of Calcutta, the loss of a united Bengal, the loss of family and friends left behind. Particularly poignant is a passage in which the author reflects on how, to go to the new Pakistan, she will have to leave her husband's grave behind in Calcutta where it will remain untended: 'the pain that we will not have any claim on Calcutta kept hurting us'.[78] The second emotion was uncertainly. Throughout her section on Partition is a refrain when she talks about other people, though also herself: 'what will happen to us now?'[79] And yet even stronger than these negative feelings was a sense of Partition as a positive new beginning. A third emotion, then, was relief. Jobeda notes, for instance, how, after the dangerous and uncertain journey from Calcutta, she arrived in Pakistan full of happiness, excitement and hope. As she writes: 'On the border we could see a signboard. On it, in big letters, was written: "Pakistan". There was so much jumping and merrymaking inside the carriage. Everybody was laughing. Everybody was shouting, "Pakistan, Pakistan. We have reached Pakistan. Now there is no more fear." I also smiled. I

[77] Jobeda Khanam, *Jiban Khatar Pataguli*, 71.
[78] Ibid., 64-5.
[79] Ibid., 74.

heaved a sigh of relief. There is no more fear in life. To save one's life one will not have to walk with worry. Now we are free, independent.'[80]

This mantra of 'no more fear' is repeated several times in *Jiban Khatar Pataguli* as the author recounts the immediate aftermath of Partition, and also the empowerment of 'going to an independent country as an independent citizen'.[81] This meaning seemed to define Jobeda's memories of Partition more than any other: that of the opportunities that it provided her as an independent Muslim woman. Hence, she reports how, immediately after Partition, she was offered a teaching job at the reputable Eden Girls' School in Dhaka alongside working on the radio. She also joined the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) through which she became involved with rehabilitation work with refugees.[82] Partition is thus portrayed as acting as a springboard for the author's later very successful career: as a teacher, as a radio artiste, as a writer, as a school inspectress, as an aid worker and as a government employee. Ultimately, she was appointed deputy director of East Pakistan's Bureau of National Reconstruction and, in 1976, the founding director of the Bangladesh Shishu Academy – an autonomous body under the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs dedicated to children's welfare. Today, her work is memorialised in the names of the Academy's library and a girls' college in Khulna.[83]

What Jobeda Khanam offers in *Jiban Khatar Pataguli*, then, is a multifaceted and often ambivalent representation of Partition that reflects her specific identities and locations – at the time and at the time of writing. As an educated, middle-class Bengali Muslim woman freed of her husband by widowhood and her father by economic

[80] Ibid., 66-7.
[81] Ibid., 66.
[82] Ibid., 67, 73.
[83] See, in *Banglapedia*, the entries for 'Bangladesh Shishu Academy' [http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Bangladesh_Shishu_Academy] and 'Koyra Upazila' [http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Koyra_Upazila].

independence, she lived through Partition without the same encumbrances that enforced silence and accentuated honour. There is some trauma for sure, but there are no clear heroes and no clear victims either. There is a sense of loss and betrayal, but also a sense of possibility – a sense of opportunity for women with real agency. Her relentless categorizing of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims', 'refugees' and 'locals', synchronises with strained memories of communal harmony in pre-Partition Bengal to highlight the complexities of 'living together': how coexistence need not eradicate boundaries, nor strong claims on identity require open discord.[84] Like other sources used to create Partition's 'new' history, this narrative enables a more personalised telling that underscores women's centrality to 1947 as a gendered story. But it also points to how widening the corpus to include autobiographical writings by Muslim women – not just from Bangladesh, but India and Pakistan too – can establish new parameters and possibilities for our understanding of Partition.[85]

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[84] I reference here a body of scholarship exemplified by Mushirul Hasan and Ashim Roy's edited volume, *Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[85] It is my intention to further explore these 'parameters and possibilities' in a fuller study of intercommunal interactions and Partition in Muslim women's autobiographical writings in due course.

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