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PARTITIONING BODIES

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PARTITIONING BODIES

Literature, Abduction and the State

Bede Scott

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

.....
Abduction

**communal
violence**

Partition

**recovery
programme**

**state
intervention**

During the 1947 Partition of India, an estimated 75,000 to 100,000 women were abducted by members of other religious communities – to be raped and murdered, sold into prostitution, or forced into marriage. In response to this crisis, the governments of India and Pakistan initiated a bilateral recovery programme whose objective it was to return ‘abducted persons’ to their natal or conjugal families. Over the last decade or so, however, criticism of this programme has become increasingly vociferous. For some writers, it merely replicated the ‘violence [of] rape, forcible abduction and marriage’; for others it was ‘propelled by the same sort of misogyny that had taken the shape of rape and torture at the hands of the enemy’. My intention in this essay is not to dispute the fact that the recovery programme involved an intolerable degree of coercion and abuse. Rather, I shall be exploring the way in which three South Asian writers (Bapsi Sidhwa, Amrita Pritam and Saadat Hasan Manto) have chosen to represent state intervention during 1947 – stressing the state’s operational diversity at such times, and clearly distinguishing between the act of abduction and that of recovery. The state is not, after all, a unitary structure that can be categorically one thing or another; it would be more accurately described as a product of the various forces operating within, and converging upon, a society at any given juncture. And so, as Timothy Mitchell suggests, one should be suspicious of any analysis that attributes to the state absolute ‘coherence, unity

[or] autonomy'. In what follows, the narratives I shall be discussing tend to confirm this fundamental heterogeneity. Moreover, a picture emerges of a state whose diversity guarantees that it is never entirely bereft of humanitarian or emancipatory potential – retaining the capacity, despite everything, to intervene positively in the lives of its citizens.

.....

No father, no brother
No henna, no ceremony
What a marriage I had.

Amrita Pritam, 'Tavarikh' (1950)

I

Although it is impossible to provide a precise figure, most estimates of the number of women abducted at the time of the 1947 Partition of India fall somewhere between 75,000 and 100,000. Two years later, during the Constituent Assembly debates on the subject, a member of parliament put 'the number of non-Muslims abducted in Pakistan at about 33,000 [and] the number of Muslim women abducted in India at about 50,000' – but then conceded that these were 'rather wild figures' (Government of India 1951: 638). Wild figures or not, what is certain is that many thousands of women were abducted, raped, sold into prostitution and forced into marriage during Partition. In the words of one social worker, women were distributed 'in the same way that baskets of oranges or grapes are sold or gifted' (Kamlaben Patel in Menon and Bhasin 1998: 76). Some were sold in the marketplace for 10 or 20 rupees apiece, others were sent as gifts to friends and acquaintances (Talib 1950: 287; Basu 1996: 123). Many of them suffered daily physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their abductors.

Not surprisingly, in the vast majority of cases these women were reluctant to discuss their experiences, and even the testimonies we do have are punctuated with elliptical silences. As Shail Mayaram observes, the traumatic events of 1947 are 'witnessed by a rupture of language' – and whatever language does survive this process takes the form of 'short, abbreviated, condensed descriptions' (1996: 151). Consider, for instance, the following statements given at the time of Partition to the Chief Liaison Officer in Lahore; for it is through such abbreviations, such curt bureaucratic cadences, that the true extent of the women's suffering makes itself felt:

Statement of Shrimati Laj Wanti, widow of Shri Manak Chand, age 23 years, caste Khatri, resident of Nurpur Sethi, District Jhelum: 'I was taken by one Abdul Ghani to his house. He was a tonga driver. I was kept in the house for over a month and badly used. I went to other houses to look [for] my son. I saw a large number of children but I was unable to find my son. During these visits I also saw a large

number of Hindu women in the houses of the Muslim inhabitants of Kamoke. All of them complained that they were being very badly used by their abductors.'

Statement of Harbhajan Kaur, wife of Sunder Singh, Shopkeeper of Alibeg, District Mirpur: 'I was taken away by Akhtar, Qudrat Ullah and Haider to village Sehutha. I was detained in the house of the father-in-law of Akhtar. Here I was raped by Akhtar and his wife's brother Araf who had come from Mandi two days later.'

Statement of Shrimati Ram Piari, wife of Amar Nath Arora, age 20 years, of Baddomali, District Sialkot: 'I was forced to accompany a Muslim whose name I do not know. Later at the asking of Labhu, a tongawala of Baghbanpura, I was taken over by him. Against my consent and at the point of a dagger I was subjected to rape by Labhu....After 7-8 days this Labhu against my wishes performed [the] Nikah ceremony with me and used me as a wife.' (Talib 1950: 261, 296, 302)

Under pressure from those who had lost wives, mothers or daughters during Partition, the Indian and Pakistani governments initiated a bilateral recovery programme that would eventually pass into legislation in India as the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, 1949. This act was intended to provide 'for the recovery of abducted persons and for their temporary detention in camps pending restoration to their relatives' (Government of India 1950: 1). And over the following eight years, 20,728 Muslim women and 9,032 Hindu and Sikh women would be recovered under its auspices (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 99).¹

On the face of it, none of this seems particularly contentious; the state had simply intervened to protect its citizens' rights and to return them to their families and communities. Since the publication of two seminal articles in 1993, however, criticism of the recovery programme has become increasingly vociferous (Butalia 1993; Menon and Bhasin 1993). According to Urvashi Butalia, one of the programme's more prominent critics, the vocabulary of recovery and rehabilitation was little more than a euphemism for the coercive practices of a paternalistic state. Although she concedes, parenthetically, that 'not all women were ...reluctant, many were happy to be recovered and restored to their families', Butalia repeatedly stresses 'the considerable pressure, sometimes even force, [that] was brought to bear on them to "convince" them to do so' (2000: 120). It is this coercive use of force, along with the state's reductive interpellation of its citizens, that ultimately delegitimizes the recovery programme in the eyes of its detractors. During the Constituent Assembly debates, one member of parliament made the point that 'it is absolutely the right of every woman to go back to her original home', while another spoke of the importance of returning 'those persons who have been virtually under confinement for over two years ... to their own families'

1 An abducted person was defined, in India, as 'a male child under the age of sixteen years or a female of whatever age who is, or immediately before the 1st day of March, 1947, was, a Muslim and who, on or after that day and before the 1st day of January, 1949, has become separated from his or her family and is found to be living with or under the control of any other individual or family, and in the latter case includes a child born to any such female after the said date' (Government of India 1950: 1).

(Government of India 1951: 665, 666). Yet for Butalia such rhetoric merely plasters over an ignominious attempt on the part of the state to provide ‘coercive backing for restoring and reinforcing patriarchy within the family’ (1993: 19). Indeed, despite one member’s claim that the Act was ‘based on humanitarian grounds’ (Government of India 1951: 661), she goes so far as to equate the ‘violence [of] rape, forcible abduction and marriage’ with the ‘further violence . . . perpetrated by the State in its relief and recovery operation’ (Butalia 2000: 91).

Over the last decade or so, this scepticism regarding the legitimacy of the recovery programme has profoundly influenced critical readings of Partition literature. For Jill Didur, writing on Rajinder Singh Bedi, the programme becomes an effort to reconstruct ‘patriarchal power’ (2006: 63) in both the domestic and civil spheres; for Deepika Bahri, writing on Bapsi Sidhwa, it was ‘propelled by the same sort of misogyny that had taken the shape of rape and torture at the hands of the enemy’ (1999: 230); and for Sujala Singh, writing on Amrita Pritam, it represents a ‘legislative endeavour’ by the state to ‘define and codify the true essence’ of its female citizens (2000: 133). In many cases, of course, these critics are quite right to interrogate the logic informing certain patriarchal state practices. However, it is also important to acknowledge those literary narratives that complicate the doctrine of state culpability; and in this essay I shall be offering a brief analysis of three such narratives: Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), Amrita Pritam’s *The Skeleton* (1950) and Saadat Hasan Manto’s ‘Open It’ (1950).

My intention here is not to dispute the fact that the recovery programme involved an intolerable degree of coercion and abuse. That is indisputable. Rather, I shall be exploring the way in which these writers have chosen to represent state intervention during 1947 – stressing the state’s operational diversity at such times, and clearly distinguishing between the act of abduction and that of recovery. The state is not, after all, a unitary structure that can be categorically one thing or another; it would be more accurately described as a product of the various forces operating within, and converging upon, a society at any given juncture. And so, as Timothy Mitchell suggests, one should be suspicious of any analysis that attributes to the state absolute ‘coherence, unity [or] autonomy’ (1991: 78). In what follows, the narratives I shall be discussing tend to confirm this fundamental heterogeneity, portraying the state as an entity whose functioning is both socially determined and characterized by a significant degree of incoherence and disunity. Moreover, a picture emerges of a state whose diversity guarantees that it is never entirely bereft of humanitarian or



emancipatory potential – retaining the capacity, despite everything, to intervene positively in the lives of its citizens.²

II

2 The fact that these writers acknowledge the state's capacity for humanitarian intervention should not, of course, be construed as evidence that they are unequivocally supportive of the recovery programme and its governing ideologies (particularly those that could be described as patriarchal or paternalistic). To adopt such a stance would be to revert to a unitary model of the state – something I shall argue all three writers implicitly reject. Instead, these narratives occupy an intermediate space between the opposing doctrines of state culpability and state infallibility – allowing our image of the state to emerge out of, and reflect, this textual equivocality.

In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Bapsi Sidhwa focalizes the atrocities of 1947 through the bewildered consciousness of an eight-year-old Parsi girl, Lenny. Near the end of the novel, as the impact of Partition makes itself felt in Lahore, the young narrator's Hindu *ayah* (nanny) is abducted by a group of Muslim rioters: 'The men drag her in grotesque strides to the cart and their harsh hands, supporting her with careless intimacy, lift her into it. Four men stand pressed against her, propping her body upright, their lips stretched in triumphant grimaces.' The last thing Lenny notices is 'Ayah, her mouth slack and piteously gaping, her dishevelled hair flying into her kidnappers' faces, staring at us as if she wanted to leave behind her wide-open and terrified eyes' (Sidhwa 1989: 183–4). After searching the city for her, Lenny's godmother finally traces Ayah to the backstreets of Hira Mandi, the red-light district of Lahore. There, she and Lenny find a woman with 'vacant eyes' and a hoarse voice, 'as if someone has mutilated her vocal cords' (260–1). She has suffered multiple rapes and been forced into prostitution by her husband and 'protector', the Ice-candy-man. It is also clear that she has been subjected to what Foucault might call a 'project of docility' – to 'a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour' (Foucault 1995: 138). In the past she had 'a rolling bouncy walk that agitate[d] the globules of her buttocks' (Sidhwa 1989: 3). Now, however, Ice-candy-man 'guides his rouged and lipsticked bride to sit beside Godmother' (260), and she does so with 'demurely lowered' (261) eyes.

Although the critic Deepika Bahri has explored *Ice-Candy-Man's* treatment of gendered violence with considerable sensitivity and insight (Bahri 1999), I find her reading of Ayah's eventual recovery by the state not entirely persuasive. As indicated above, she bases her analysis on the premise that 'the enterprise of recovery . . . was propelled by the same sort of misogyny that had taken the shape of rape and torture at the hands of the enemy'. And this adherence to the doctrine of state culpability leads her to claim that 'Ayah, the victim-protagonist of the novel, has been "recovered" . . . and sent on to Amritsar in India, repatriated and dislocated to make the truncated body of the Indian nation partially whole again in a *feeble gesture that compensates no one*' (219; my emphasis). Of course, such a conclusion may be consistent with Bahri's position on the recovery programme in general, but it is simply not supported by a close reading of the novel itself. Ayah's distress could not be clearer, and Sidhwa repeatedly emphasizes the gulf that

has opened up between her body, as an object of Foucauldian ‘docility-utility’ (Foucault 1995: 137), and her subjectivity, which continues to resist such disciplinary strategies. In fact, in the dialogue that takes place during the visit to Hira Mandi, it is Ayah’s determination to re-enter the patriarchal structure of the family that resonates. There is, for her, a pragmatic choice to be made – between the brutalizing patriarchy of the brothel, and the relatively benign patriarchy of her family:

‘I want to go to my family,’ [Ayah says] ...

‘What’s happened has happened,’ says Godmother. ‘But you are married to him now. You must make the best of things. He truly cares for you.’

‘I will not live with him.’ Again that coarse, rasping whisper...

‘What if your family won’t take you back?’ [Godmother] asks.

‘Whether they want me or not, I’ll go.’...

[S]lipping to the floor like a floating bundle of crumpled silk, Ayah grasps Godmother’s legs. ‘Please – I fall at your feet, *Baijee* – please get me away from him.’

‘Are you sure that’s what you want?’ says Godmother, bending to look into her face. ‘You might regret your decision... You should think it over.’

‘I have thought it over ... I want to go to my folk.’ (261–3)

Some time later, at Godmother’s behest, the Pakistani police recover Ayah (‘a willing accompanist’) from the red-light district and deposit her, ‘with her scant belongings wrapped in cloth bundles and a small tin trunk, at the Recovered Women’s Camp on Warris Road’ (275). And as the novel draws to a close, Lenny is told that ‘Ayah, at last, has gone to her family in Amritsar’ (277). Given the circumstances, Bahri’s suggestion that this recovery is ‘a feeble gesture that compensates no one’ appears somewhat incongruous, as does her claim that the programme itself was ‘propelled by the same sort of misogyny that had taken the shape of rape and torture’ during Partition. There is a danger here, it seems, of conflating the multiple, often competing, patriarchies which assert themselves at such times, and establishing a somewhat dubious equivalence between quite different patriarchal practices. Some disciplinary strategies, in other words, are better than others; and for Ayah at least, the ‘disciplines’ of the state are infinitely preferable to those she has endured in the red-light district – being made ‘to dance like a performing monkey’, being ‘raped by butchers, drunks, and *goondas*’ (248), having ‘drunks, pedlars, sahibs, and cut-throats [use] her like a sewer’ (250).

Nowhere is the conflict between these competing patriarchies more pronounced than in the scene in which Ayah is recovered from Hira Mandi. The police enter the red-light district as representatives of both state (‘armed with the might of a small and fluttering green flag’) and judiciary (‘waving

signed papers'), and it is the authority conferred upon them by these dual symbols of institutional power that enables this intervention. '[They] swarmed through the rooms of Ice-candy-man's *Kotha*, and finding Ayah there took her away, a willing accompanist, to the black van. And all the Mandi pimps and poets and musicians ... could do nothing about it.' Although Ice-candy-man pursues Ayah to the recovered women's camp, there too his 'outrage and broken bones and pimpy influence [are] to no avail' (274–5). The traditional patriarchal structure of the red-light district – a place Ice-candy-man refers to as 'the cradle of royal bastards' (246) – proves to be no match for the recently consecrated power of the postcolonial state.

This recovery quite clearly emphasizes the susceptibility of the state to a wide range of social pressures, and suggests that Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin may be right to resist characterizing it as 'always authoritarian or acting against women's interests' (1998: 8). After all, it is Godmother who sets 'the entire conglomerate in motion ... single-handedly engender[ing] the social and moral climate of retribution and justice required to rehabilitate our fallen Ayah' (274). Godmother's intervention also provides a useful reminder that in Pakistan during the late 1940s 'it was women's groups which had to take the initiative to prod a callous and unresponsive government to do something about the plight of abducted women' (Jalal 1996: 689). As I have suggested, it is impossible to isolate representatives of the state from the social space they occupy, and so their actions are inevitably determined by the various forces operating at any given time within that sphere. In this case, through the intermediary of Godmother, the state registers Ayah's desire 'to go to [her] family' and duly facilitates her recovery. If, however, we as readers choose to ignore Ayah's plaintive entreaties, if we disregard her emphatic desire to return to her family, then we are in danger of suppressing what little agency she may have managed to preserve in the face of such dehumanizing abuse.

III

First published in Punjabi in 1950, Amrita Pritam's *The Skeleton* relates the experiences of a young Hindu girl named Pooro who is abducted by Rashida, a Muslim from a neighbouring village. Partition has yet to take place, and Rashida makes it clear that he has abducted her not for 'communal' reasons but as part of an ongoing feud between their two families. 'They made me take an oath on the Koran', he says, 'that I would abduct the Sahukar's daughter before she was wed' (Pritam 2003: 12). Once it becomes obvious that her family has abandoned her to her fate, Pooro agrees to marry him – a marriage she regards as a painful anomaly, a subversion of the traditional

Hindu marriage she had come to see as her ‘birthright’ (14). ‘[On the] third day the Maulvi came with another two or three men. They performed Pooro’s marriage ceremony with Rashida... Six months later a tiny life began to stir inside her frame’ (16–18).

Like Sidhwa, Pritam is scrupulously attentive to the differences between various patriarchal orders and practices. And she is particularly careful to stress the fact that distinctions between such patriarchies are always a matter of historical contingency – a consequence of their actions at specific times and in specific places. It is impossible, therefore, to dismiss all families or communities or states as inherently repressive structures, just as it makes no sense to argue that they are always emancipatory or progressive. As Terry Eagleton writes,

Power and authority are of course excellent things; it all depends on who has them in what circumstances for which purposes. The power to undo wretchedness is to be celebrated rather than derided, and the power to undo it absolutely is absolutely to be celebrated. (Eagleton 1997: 56)

In the novel it is Rashida, Pooro’s abductor/husband, who most clearly embodies this sense of historical contingency. At first we, like Pooro, see him as a lascivious and exploitative figure: ‘Hate welled up in [her] heart as she heard Rashida’s words. He had robbed her of her birthright; he had robbed her of her future’ (Pritam 2003: 14). However, as time passes and Pooro gradually becomes reconciled to her circumstances, she tries ‘to forget that Rashida had abducted and wronged her... After all, he was her husband and the father of her son. This alone was true; this alone mattered.’ Accordingly, she determines to settle ‘in Sakkar as if she had always belonged to the village’ and shows ‘no desire to go anywhere else’ (33–4). But a certain ambivalence lingers, and for some time Rashida occupies a contradictory position within the narrative as both protective husband and malevolent abductor – becoming, as it were, both Rama and Ravana to Pooro’s Sita. At one point, for instance, she dreams of ‘Rashida galloping away with her lying across his saddle . . . keeping her in a gardener’s hut for three nights and days and then throwing her out.’ On waking, however, she realizes that ‘he had not left her, nor thrown her out. She was safely installed in his house. He was a kind husband’ (38–9). Of course, the irony here, as Sujala Singh points out, is that ‘the threatening abductor of her nightmares and the kind husband whose shelter she is grateful for once she wakes up are one and the same person’ (2000: 130).

The intervention of Partition at this stage of the narrative is decisive. ‘Just as a peeled orange falls apart into many segments’, Pritam writes, ‘the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of the Punjab broke away from each other. As clouds of dust float over the roads, rumours of “incidents” began to float

over the countryside.’ More often than not, these ‘incidents’ involve ‘the abduction of Hindu girls by Muslims and of Muslim girls by Hindus. Some had been forced into marriage, some murdered, some stripped and paraded naked in the streets. Thus passed August 15 of the year 1947’ (Pritam 2003: 56–7). And it is this historical moment, the sudden irruption of these historical forces, that provides Rashida with the opportunity to redeem himself in Pooro’s eyes. Discovering that one of the abducted women living in a nearby village is in fact her sister-in-law, Pooro implores him to ‘lift her away just as you lifted me onto your saddle’ (67). Rashida agrees, and in an act that simultaneously replicates and reverses the novel’s inaugural transgression, rescues the young Hindu girl from her Muslim abductor. As he carries her to safety on his horse, he remembers that ‘when he had abducted Pooro his conscience had weighed like a stone which had become heavier and heavier’. That night, however, as he rides through the darkness, the weight of his conscience slowly lifts and he feels ‘as light as a flower . . . in the fragrant breeze’ (73).

Clearly, for Pritam, these two ‘interventions’ are not ‘propelled by the same sort of misogyny’; nor does the second merely perpetuate the violence of the first. In fact, despite their symmetry within the narrative, they are as incommensurable and mutually negating as Ayah’s abduction and recovery in *Ice-Candy-Man*. That they should both be performed by the same man further highlights their status as diametrical opposites – for it is only by recovering Lajo that Rashida manages to rectify the moral deficit he had incurred by abducting Pooro. And so, when Lajo is finally delivered to her family in Lahore, his face reflects ‘both pride and humility – the first because of the good turn he had done to Lajo, the second because of his having abducted Pooro. He felt that he had partly redeemed the debt of honour he owed on that score’ (84).

But what role does the state play in all of this? How does it influence these processes of recovery and rehabilitation? Not long after she is first abducted, Pooro begs Rashida to return her to her family. ‘Good woman’, he replies, ‘you have no place in that family any more’ (13). Refusing to believe him, she escapes and makes her way back to her natal village. After walking through the night, she collapses on the mud floor of her parents’ courtyard, ‘moaning like a wounded animal’ (15), but they refuse to take her back. ‘Who will marry you now?’ her father asks. ‘You have lost your faith and your birthright. . . . Daughter, it were better if you had died at birth’ (16). Hearing this, Pooro realizes she has no choice but to return to Rashida, and when he decides to move to a village some miles away, she acquiesces without hesitation. ‘After her parents had turned her away from their door, leaving the ancestral village did not seem so momentous. All said and done, what difference did it make? All villages were alike’ (17). But of course these events take place before August 1947 – and once more the intervention of

Partition proves decisive. During the first half of 1948, confronted by a conservative intransigence that was significantly impeding the recovery programme, the Indian state issued a series of public appeals urging families to accept abducted women back into their homes. On 16 January, for instance, Jawaharlal Nehru made the following statement in the *Hindustan Times*:

Among the many problems that we have to face, one of the most urgent is the recovery of girls and women who have been abducted. We must strain every nerve to help these unfortunate women to go back to their homes. Their friends and relatives should welcome them back and give them all comfort and solace after their harrowing experience. I am told that sometimes there is an unwillingness on the part of their relatives to accept the girls back in their homes. This is a most objectionable and wrong attitude for anyone to take and any social custom that supports this attitude must be condemned. These girls require our loving and tender care and their relatives should be proud to take them back... I hope that our people and the Government will cooperate in this vital work. (Nehru 1987: 113)

During the same period the Ministry of Rehabilitation even issued a pamphlet invoking the Laws of Manu to argue that ‘a woman who had sex with a man other than her husband became purified after three menstrual cycles, and that her family should have no hesitation in accepting her back’ (Das 1995: 80). Here, rather than providing ‘coercive backing for restoring and reinforcing patriarchy within the family’ (Butalia 1993: 19), the state was actively attempting to subvert a variety of longstanding patriarchal conventions structured around notions of sexual purity and masculine honour.

Similarly, in *The Skeleton*, there is a clear distinction made between Pooro’s pre-1947 rejection by her family and Lajo’s post-1947 acceptance back into the family fold – a difference that can be attributed to the rehabilitative interventions of the state. When Pooro asks Rashida whether her family will reject Lajo as a consequence of her abduction, he explains that there has been a ‘Government proclamation ordering people to hand over all abducted persons, so that they [can] be exchanged for others similarly abducted by Indians. Parents [have] been exhorted to receive back their abducted daughters.’ In response to this news, a ‘sense of resentment surge[s] in [Pooro’s] mind. When it had happened to her, religion had become an insurmountable obstacle; neither her parents nor her in-laws-to-be had been willing to accept her. And now, the same religion had become so accommodating!’ (Pritam 2003: 67). Only as a result of state intervention, Pooro implies, was it possible to clear this space for abducted women within the parameters of the family and the religious community – reshaping, at



least to some degree, prevailing social attitudes towards the victims of such atrocities. In the words of one Indian government publication issued in 1948:

Gandhiji's appeal to Indians that 'those Hindu and Sikh sisters who have been abducted, molested or converted by Muslims should be received with open arms and given the same place which they occupied before in society', reinforced by similar statements by the Prime Minister and other Indian leaders, has brought about an appreciable change for the better in the attitude of the people. (Government of India 1948: 71)

IV

As I have suggested, however, it would be a mistake to caricature all families as repositories of conservative values and intransigence – or, for that matter, as inherently coercive structures. To highlight this point, I would like to conclude by briefly comparing two different analyses of the same Saadat Hasan Manto story, 'Open It'. In this story, an old man, Sirajuddin, becomes separated from his only daughter as they make their way across the border into Pakistan. On arriving at the refugee camp in Mughalpura, he joins the numerous other men searching for their 'missing mothers, wives and daughters'. But he is unable to remember exactly where or how he lost her – the only memory he retains of their journey from Amritsar being 'the sight of his wife's corpse with all her entrails spilled out' (Manto 2001: 131). Finally, in desperation, he asks some 'young volunteers' to help find his daughter. 'She's fair', he says to them, 'and very beautiful like her mother, not me. She's about fourteen... She's my only daughter. Please try to find her, God will bless you' (132). The volunteers agree, and several days later they come across his daughter, Sakina, standing by the side of the road. At first, it seems, they treat her with kindness:

They fed her, gave her milk to drink and helped her up onto the lorry. One of the young men handed his jacket to her. As she felt uncomfortable without her *dupatta*, she was vainly trying to cover her breasts with her hands.

But when Sirajuddin later asks them if they have found his daughter, their reply is ominous: "'We will, we will,' [they say] with one voice' (133). Time passes as before, until one day four different men arrive bearing a 'lifeless body' on a stretcher. Recognizing the body as that of his daughter, Sirajuddin follows them into the camp hospital. Asked to identify himself by the examining doctor, he answers, 'I... I'm her father'. The doctor gestures towards a window and says, 'Khol do' ('Open it'), at which point Sakina stirs, and with 'lifeless hands' reaches down to untie the waistband on

her trousers. Seeing this, Sirajuddin cries out, ‘She’s alive! My daughter’s alive!’ (133–4). The doctor breaks into a cold sweat.

Over the course of her career, the anthropologist Veena Das has offered two quite different analyses of this story: the first co-written with Ashis Nandy in 1985, the second published in late 1996. In many ways the latter serves as an amendment to the former; but it is the contrast between the two that I find particularly instructive. For Das, writing in 1985, the climax of Manto’s story represents a ‘breakdown in signification’ – demonstrating ‘how the experience of bodily mutilation would permanently mutilate the use of ordinary language’. The fact that Sakina misinterprets the doctor’s simple imperative suggests that she has been irrevocably scarred by her experiences. She has become, in short, a ‘living corpse’, solely cognizant of the language of violence and violation. Sirajuddin’s incongruous cry of joy also represents, for Das, an epistemological crisis. No longer capable of ‘registering the difference between life and death’, he misinterprets the ‘symbol of her living death’ as a ‘symbol of life’ – and thus reinforces the ‘chasms’ of incomprehensibility that have opened up around his violated daughter. ‘There is no question here of a return to normalcy’, she writes, ‘for normality itself has become fractured and bruised’ (Das and Nandy 1985: 189–91).

Eleven years later, however, Das provides us with a far more positive reading of Manto’s story – one that I feel more accurately reflects the nuances of the text itself. ‘In the societal context of this period’, she observes,

when ideas of purity and honour densely populated the literary narratives, as well as family and political narratives, so that fathers willed their daughters to die for family honour rather than live with bodies that had been violated by other men, *this father wills his daughter to live even as parts of her body can do nothing else but proclaim her brutal violation.*

The point is, I believe, worthy of its author’s italics. In ‘Open It’, Sirajuddin is not condemning his daughter to a ‘living death’ by misinterpreting her gesture of submission; he is, rather, transforming it into a sign of life, of human endurance in the face of (literally) unspeakable suffering. ‘In the speech of the father’, Das writes, ‘the daughter is alive . . . he creates through his utterance a home for her mutilated and violated self.’ She then asks us to compare this moment of accommodation with those accounts – familiar to us from *The Skeleton* – in which the ‘archetypal motif was of a girl finding her way to her parents’ home after having been subjected to rape and plunder, and being told, “why are you here – it would have been better if you were dead.” Against stories such as these, ‘a single sentence of joy uttered by Sirajuddin transforms the meaning of being a father’; it is, Das concludes, ‘the beginning of a relationship, not its end’ (Das 1996: 77–8).

As a result of her experiences, Sakina's body has been transformed into what I have called, citing Foucault, an object of 'docility-utility'. She understands only one kind of imperative, and obeys it without question or dissent. But Das is quite right to distinguish here between the disciplinary practices of abductors and those of fathers – for in the vast majority of cases the two categories do not bear comparison. Of course, somewhat typically, Manto complicates matters by making the 'young volunteers' responsible for Sakina's abduction; but the genuine recovery, when it comes, is seen in unequivocally positive terms. Like many of Manto's Partition stories, 'Open It' is a work of supreme empathy, and it is this quality in particular that makes one hesitate before disparaging the motives of fathers such as Sirajuddin or those men Manto describes frantically searching for their 'missing mothers, wives and daughters'.

Of the narratives we have discussed thus far, 'Open It' perhaps most clearly emphasizes the operational diversity of the state during periods of social crisis. Although the state itself is not mentioned in the story, its representatives are ubiquitous. These evidently include the 'young volunteers' who exploit their quasi-official status to perpetrate further atrocities. And yet it may be assumed that the men who finally deliver Sakina to the camp are also volunteers, also representatives of the state:

That evening, Sirajuddin was sitting in the camp when he noticed some commotion. Four men were carrying a girl on a stretcher. He asked and learned that she had been found unconscious near the railway lines.... The men brought her into the hospital and went away. (Manto 2001: 133)

In *The Skeleton*, as noted earlier, an inverted symmetry is established between abduction and recovery that serves to foreground their status as diametrical opposites. The fact that Rashida is responsible for both Poro's abduction and Lajo's recovery emphasizes the profound disparity between these two 'processes' – the latter intervention enabling him to rectify the moral deficit he has incurred as a consequence of the former. Manto's story offers a telling variation on this dynamic in that the men responsible for Sakina's abduction, the 'young volunteers', are members of the same state apparatus as the four men who finally, and genuinely, perform her recovery. Here, too, the fact that the latter process so completely negates the former underlines their fundamental irreconcilability; but in this case the state's duality also provides a valuable reminder of its 'contradictory and uneven functioning' (Sunder Rajan 2003: x) during such crises.

It is important, once more, to acknowledge the personal tragedies and suffering that came about as a consequence of the post-1947 recovery programme. However, in the literary narratives we have been discussing a picture emerges of a state that is both structurally and operationally

heterogeneous – responsible for intolerable abuses and appalling failures, yet also capable of genuinely ‘therapeutic’ interventions. And it is this heterogeneity, this susceptibility to diverse social forces, that should prevent us from characterizing the state as ‘always authoritarian or acting against women’s interests’ (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 8). Indeed, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan points out, the postcolonial Indian state ‘constitutionally guarantees women’s equality’ and ‘has even responded – sometimes inadvertently, sometimes as a result of pressures from outside ... and sometimes with deliberate benign or progressive intent – in a “positive” way to women’s issues’ (2003: x). The literature we have been exploring here also raises the possibility that the fathers of these abducted women were not (or not always) attempting to reinforce ‘male authority within the family’ (Butalia 1993: 19) by agitating for the return of their daughters. Nor, it is suggested, were they necessarily perpetuating the same kind of violence and misogyny that the women had suffered at the hands of their abductors. On the contrary: in many cases these men may simply have been seeking to restore certain fundamental human interdependencies and to reverse, as far as they were able, the most inhuman forms of abuse – something that could only be done by mobilizing the institutional resources and legislative authority of the postcolonial state.

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