Partition of colonial India in 1947 – forming two nation-states, India and Pakistan, at the time of its independence from almost two centuries of British rule – was a deeply violent and gendered experience. Although there were many significant differences in partition in the eastern region and the western, they share one compelling similarity. In both regions, women of all ages became specific targets of communal violence. As Urvashi Butalia writes, “About 750,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religion different from their own (and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion)” (1998: 3). Clearly, we have to attend to and make sense of this incredible scale of gender violence as the first critical response to the violence of partition. However, this is not the only way gender as an analytical category becomes critical and illuminating in understanding partition. Partition played upon gendered relationships that constitute women’s relationships to their families, to their communities, to the nation and to the state. Grappling with these aspects is necessary to have any understanding of partition. Conversely, partition also allows us a critical insight into the nature and structures of gender relationships that hold normal, everyday life together. It is, then, an instructive historical juncture for feminist analysis.

I argue that partition should be addressed in feminist scholarship as both an extraordinary instance of violence as well as a problematic that is related to the “everyday” that women inhabit. I take the concept of the “everyday world” from Dorothy Smith (1987). Smith’s “everyday world” points to the lived reality within the private sphere: women’s embodied, gendered lives within the domestic space that are effected and affected by major events in the public, political sphere of men. Primarily, the concept of the “everyday world” in Smith’s work is designed to connect the domestic lives of women to the political world at a given historical instance. However, by keeping as constant the links between lives of women with both “ordinary times” and extraordinary historical events respectively, we can create a feminist reading of the connection between the ordinary, banal, normal political world and an instance of extraordinary violence, partition.

This chapter is divided in four sections. I begin with a brief overview of the field of partition scholarship, interpreting it as a mediation between reading the extraordinary and the ordinary. In the second section, drawing from the feminist scholarship on partition, I aim to show not only...
how the catastrophic political upheaval bleeds into the everyday personal lives of women, but also how the family, the community, the nation and the state collude in fixing “woman” as a symbol of honor and therefore as a location of violence. Developing this argument further in the third section, I position partition as a critical, analytical node of history to grapple with the symbolic status which nationalisms of all hues bestow upon “woman.” In this section, I offer an analysis of a short story, “Lajwanti” by Rajinder Singh Bedi (1951), to show how the extraordinary violence of partition, if different in degree, is contiguous to the violence that constitutes the “everyday world” of women, perpetrated by patriarchy that structures both the familial and the national. In the fourth section I turn to the partition experience of Bengal, the role of the undivided Communist Party of India and the figure of the refugee woman, to suggest a different kind of feminist politics in terms of the relationship of women with the political world. I argue that the process of politicization of the refugees, especially the refugee women, in the newly formed Indian nation-state, opens up the signification of woman in post-partition politics and polity. I claim this makes the refugee woman a historical, transitional figure who needs to be read not only as enabling a critique of the colonial past, but who also becomes an agent of radical politics within and against the state at the start of a different kind of political struggle.

I end with a coda, which reflects on the directions in which the field of partition studies is developing, and where I think it needs to go. The perspective that I develop in this chapter is shaped by my location in India. Although drawing on the Indian context, I hope to think through partition as a larger problematic in a broader South Asian context. The concluding section includes, therefore, a discussion of the need to move beyond India-focused analyses.

**Partition Studies**

Partition, by its very nature, elicits two kinds of responses from scholars, writers, artists and other commentators. One response is to point to partition's immensely traumatic dimension, expressed in its descriptions in terms of “madness,” its unspeakable horror, incomprehensibility, its singularity, its limit-case status as something that cannot be adequately represented or narrated. The other response, somewhat in opposition, is to insist on partition’s historicity; its connections with modern, social, political, gendered institutions, structures and practices; its entanglement with unequal, nebulous flows of power between (gendered) individuals and peoples (divided by class, ethnicity, religion, caste, language, region). Scholars working on other instances of collective catastrophe have observed that, very often, creative writers, artists, literature scholars, and humanities at large express the first point of view; whereas historians and social scientists take the second stand. And yet, to address a catastrophe that comes to define a whole people, its history and representation, one has to be able to respect the force of both of these contradictory positions and negotiate between the two. The field of partition studies has, to a large extent, made a strong attempt to do so. Comparable to women’s studies before it, partition studies has been interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, out of this necessity. It has had to break disciplinary boundaries and orthodoxies in the process and chart out new paths.

When I say partition studies, I refer to the field that was inaugurated by a few influential critical volumes arriving closely after each other within a few years in India, starting in around 1995 (Das 1995; Butalia 1998; Menon and Bhasin 1998; Pandey 2001). Alongside these volumes, several edited anthologies of literature, commentaries and analyses also appeared. Many of these collections combined fiction/“literary responses,” memoirs, interviews, historical studies, with critical analysis of different kinds. While a few literary figures of the Progressive Writers Association, most notably Sa’adat Hasan Manto, had been alive in public memory, these years saw newer translations, editions and repeated anthologizing of these authors. There was a renewed
interest in novels and films of partition as well; literary and cinematic analyses of such texts also began to appear in these anthologies and academic journals. Important international journals put out dedicated sections and special issues on partition: for example, the second issue of the first volume of the important *Interventions: Journal of Postcolonial Studies* was on partition (Menon 1999). Together, these provided a sense of a field by 2001.

If, in part, the impetus of these works came from the renewed interest in partition on the approaching fiftieth anniversary of partition/independence, the urgency to systematically analyze partition was also equally triggered by the climate of intellectual crisis in the wake of the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, an event which irreparably tore open the seams of the imagination of a secular India and showed that partition and partition-like violence were not something to be neatly contained or containable in the past. The anti-Muslim carnage in Bhagalpur in 1989 and widespread riots and pogroms against the Muslims after the Babri-Masjid demolition in 1992 were further reminders that partition needed immediate address. A profound, expressed dissatisfaction in how partition had been addressed in the academy and the public sphere up until then also strongly provoked into being and gave definitive shape to partition studies.

An examination of this field will reveal that a serious interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary energy not only inform it, but the traditional disciplines themselves were modified and came under critical examination during this process. On the one hand, we find a certain frustration with traditional disciplinary methods of history. As Urvashi Butalia would write with utter dismay, nowhere in partition historiography could she find “‘the human dimensions’ of this history” (1998: 7). The top-down “history” of partition focused exclusively on political causes, national leaders and high politics (1998: 6–9) and had nothing to say about the millions of people who lived through partition. It was especially silent on how women experienced partition. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin would argue that “there has been no feminist historiography of the partition of India, not even of the compensatory variety” (1998: 8). These scholars would turn, therefore, to oral history as a “feminist methodological tool” to ask, “How does ‘history’ look when seen through the eyes of women?” (Butalia 1998: 21). Gyanendra Pandey (2001), coming from a Subaltern Studies perspective, would show how to work within the discipline of history but also remain sensitive to the contingencies of memory and narrative, of “people’s voices,” and questions of gender (Pandey 1992, 2001). Later, Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar (2007), among others, would similarly demonstrate the richness of work possible by crossing traditional, institutional history with oral history methods. Clearly, in writing a new history of partition in the face of an overwhelming gap in the existing historiography, the scholars would be influenced by the literary responses to partition, which were the only collective, public memorial of the event. The influence of partition literature is immense in the academic scholarship on partition. Scholars have attempted to read the testimonials of their interviewees, showing sensitivity to memory, language, narratives, fragmentation and aporias that constitute these verbal responses.

On the other hand, scholars of literature, along with attending to partition fiction through literary criticism, have had to understand literary responses to partition as historical fiction and in conversation with sociological processes. In several instances, however, the gap between historical fiction and historiography became so blurred that we see an imperative to read literary representation as though it were historiography. In many such cases, readings of literary texts sought to hear and “recover” the voice of the victims. Jill Didur (2006), in what I consider to be an important intervention, has problematized this approach. Didur critiques reducing fiction to history by bypassing its deliberate *mediatedness* through language and textual strategies. Didur thus “offers a reading strategy that emphasizes the indirect, mediated, and fragmented representational practices that inform all testimony and literature” (2006: 19). Other than in the
field of literature, illuminating work has also been done on the representation of partition in cinema and other registers of “culture” at large, which seeks to examine and learn from the gaps in the representation of partition as well as instances when public memory and its articulation work against recorded history.7

In all of these endeavors, disciplines trained to look for the systemic and the structural dimensions of partition (history, anthropology, sociology and other social sciences) have had to learn about the contingencies of narrative and memory. They have had to allow for understanding partition as an extraordinary traumatic event that can neither be fully recounted, nor be accounted for by social and political analyses, no matter how rigorous. On the other hand, disciplines trained to attend to trauma and narrative (literature, cinema and cultural studies in its multiple locations) have had to engage with the historical and the sociological dimensions to make sense of partition and its difficult connection with the historic-ordinary forms of the everyday world. This nuanced approach has made partition studies particularly well equipped to attend to questions of gender. Or, perhaps it is more pertinent to say that the gendered nature of partition experience has necessitated the multidisciplinary approach of partition studies.

Women and violence: from family to the state

Work by Das (1995), Butalia (1998) and Menon and Bhasin (1998) right at the beginning of the field has shown that the violence of partition for women ranged from gender relationships within the family to those with the nation/state. Women were subject to horrific forms of sexual violence during partition, which points to the precarious position of women in the patriarchal arrangement of society. What is more, the victimization of women of the “other community” was not the only kind of violence that women faced. No one hesitates in condemning “the abduction and rape of women, the physical mutilation of their bodies, the tattooing of their sexual organs with symbols of the other religion” (Butalia 1998: 204). However, communities are far less willing to speak about the fact that many women were killed by their own kinsmen to “save their honor”; that many committed suicide for the same reason; that many women and children, alongside sometimes elderly men, were “martyred” to “protect” them against forced conversion. Even less willing were they to talk of any woman who may have escaped martyrdom and “honorable death” to survive beyond rape and abduction. Bhasin and Menon, therefore, write about the violence against women by their own family and kin to save their honor that was “permissible” (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 31–64). While “the lines between choice and coercion” are very difficult to draw in this context, Butalia prompts us to question why “nowhere in the discourses on partition, do such incidents [of honorable death and martyrdom] count as violent incidents” (1998: 212–214). We are directed, thus, to examine the history, the contours and structure of the category of “honor” itself, tied as it is to patriarchal notions of female sexual purity and chastity.

The state, too, as the history of partition shows, duplicates the violence of fixing the value of a woman in terms of her sexuality and to treat her merely as currency in an honor economy. Das, Butalia, and Menon and Bhasin draw our attention to the Recovery Operation of the Government of India, especially “The Abducted Persons Act” passed in December 1949 in the Indian Parliament. They point out that, to begin with, the Act’s definition of an abducted person was a “male child of sixteen years or a female of whatever age” (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 71, emphasis added). While the Act granted immense power to the police to intercept any person they considered abducted after March 31, 1947, it entirely failed to conceive of women as legal subjects with opinions of their own. No matter that the “circumstances of their ‘abduction’ varied widely”: “some were left behind as hostages for the safe passage of their families; others
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were separated from their group or family while escaping, or strayed and were picked up; still others were initially given protection and then incorporated into the host family” (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 89–90). The circumstances in which these women were living differed greatly too: some “changed hands several times,” others had become “second, or third wives,” while “very many were converted and married and living with considerable dignity and respect” (ibid.: 90). Recovery and return to their “own countries” and kinsmen did not have the same meaning and consequence for women in these varied circumstances. For many, the chance of being accepted back into their pre-partition marital or parental families was non-existent. For these reasons and for others, many of them preferred to stay on. As a further complication of a complex transition, to the women who had borne children, recovery could mean separation from their offspring; for pregnant women, abortion. Yet, the wishes of these adult women had no legal standing and many, when they were found, were “recovered” forcefully by the police.

This scholarship does not suggest at any point that the “recovery effort should not have been made” (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 91) or that the women were living their lives free from trauma. Rather, it seeks to analyze the recovery program’s rationale, nature, imperatives and execution. “The single most important point about the Abducted Persons Bill,” write Menon and Bhasin, therefore, “was that it was passed at all, since the maximum number of recoveries had been made in 1947–49, before the Bill was introduced in the parliament” (1998: 122). They ask, “why was the Indian government so anxious to reclaim women, sometimes several years after their abduction?” (ibid.). Their analysis leaves little room for doubt that the recovery operation, even when “humanitarian and welfarist in its objective” (ibid.: 107), was driven by the prerogative of “the Indian nation” to reclaim “its” women from an “enemy nation,” as a matter of “national honor.” This prerogative was so strong that the design of this operation was oblivious to the interests of the women themselves where such interests were not convergent with the desires of a paternalistic state.8

As this body of work amply illustrates, patriarchal interests of the family, community and the nation lie in a spectrum, distinct but often overlapping. I thus concur with Jasodhara Bagchi when she critiques the “tendency . . . in current discussions on women’s rights and citizenship . . . to pit the community as a greater ally of women as against the nation-state posed as site of harsh surveillance . . .” and when she points to “the nation–community nexus” (2003: 20). This understanding of community is also close to that of Gyanendra Pandey, who argues that communities are “constructed . . . through a language of violence” (2001: 204).9

Women and violence: the “everyday world” of women and history

Using Dorothy Smith’s “the everyday world” as a mediating concept between not only women’s lives in domestic space and the larger political world, but also between a period of violence and “normal” times, my purpose here is to bring the extraordinary violence of partition within the ambit of the historical. We can then begin to apprehend that gendered partition violence, in spite of its extremeness, is not a historical aberration. I specifically suggest that the discursive links between the gendered imaginations that animated anti-colonial nationalisms from at least the late nineteenth century, communalisms from the early twentieth century, and partition need to be read and emphasized in order to gain an insight into the specific forms of gender violence that marked partition.

Writing about the partition experience of north India, Gyanendra Pandey discusses “the misogynist north Indian proverb, ‘beeran ki kai jaat’ (‘what caste [or nationality] can a woman have?’) – for she ‘belongs’ to someone else, and therefore to his caste, nationality and religion” (2001: 165). Pandey then goes on to point to the apparent paradox: “Yet, the evidence from 1947
seems at times to suggest almost the exact opposite: not that ‘women [had] no religion (or community or nation)’, but that they came for a moment to stand for nothing else’ (ibid.). This apparent paradox gets to the heart of the problematic that I am trying to lay down here. If we consider the gendered texture of the most mainstream Indian anti-colonial nationalism from the late nineteenth century, be it revivalist nationalism or liberal reformist nationalism, this paradox would illuminate the duality of the condition for women – that they at once are “empty” of caste/national marks and yet, at times of nation-making, they come to stand for nothing else.

Nation imagined as a woman, be it as a wife, a mother, or a (mother) goddess, was a legacy from the mid-nineteenth century that persisted through the twentieth century; indeed, it still persists. Clearly, the obverse of this imagination, that “woman” itself becomes a symbol of the nation, is written into this figuration of the nation. No wonder then that if the nation needs to be negotiated through violence, as in the history of communal violence and partition, gendered female bodies indeed become the specific site of that violence. This slippage from the symbolic to the material is already scripted in cultural nationalism; the material counterpart to this discursive violence becomes visible in the history of communal violence and partition and we begin to find an answer to the “vexed question: Why are women’s bodies subjected to gendered forms of communal hostility?” (Mookerjea-Leonard 2003: 1).

Perhaps no literary text brings out the complex layering of violence that writes the historical imagination of “woman” in the context of nation formation as well as a woman’s life in normal times and the time of a political catastrophe, and the braiding of these, as I have been arguing above, than Rajinder Singh Bedi’s short story ‘Lajwanti’ (1951). Written in Urdu by Bedi, a prominent member of the Progressive Writers Association, it is a well-known story, frequently anthologized, and is central to what has come to be the core body of “partition fiction.” I offer a reading of the story here to show the contiguity of violence of the “everyday world” in both domestic space and the political space of nation-making, and extreme forms of gender violence that partition occasioned.

The plot of the story goes thus: Lajwanti, a young girl, who used to sing “‘Marry a city Boy?’ – No sir, not me./Look at his boots, and my waist is so narrow . . ., took no notice at all” of Sunder Lal’s “large, heavy boots,” and “forgot all about her narrow waist” when he wanted to marry her (1951: 16). After marriage, Sunder Lal, quite as predicted by the song, “never spared any effort in treating his own Lajwanti as badly as possible” and beating her “on the flimsiest pretext, taking exception to the way she got up, the way she sat down, the way she cooked food – anything and everything” (15). Nevertheless, during partition, when Lajwanti was abducted, Sunder Lal was inconsolable. He became the secretary of the program to rehabilitate the abducted women and worked with fervor. Then one day, Lajwanti was spotted in the Wagah Border. Unlike “the husbands, parents, or siblings who refused even to recognize” the recovered women (18) or those who raised voices that they “were not about to take back . . . Muslim leftovers!” (26), true to his word and deed, Sunder Lal went and brought Lajwanti back. After Lajwanti’s return, however, there was a remarkable change in Sunder Lal’s treatment of her. From this point onward he “no longer called her Laju, but ‘Devi’” (27). He stopped beating her and treated her as befitting a devi, a goddess. His devi, however was not allowed to speak of her trauma, no matter how much “she felt overwhelmed with desire to tell him all, holding back nothing” (28). While Sunder Lal assured her she was not to be “blamed for what has happened. Society is at fault for its lack of respect for goddesses like” her (28), he also “deftly avoided listening to her” (27). And therefore, “Lajwanti could not get it all out” (28).

As “Lajwanti” allows us to see, there is a complex contiguity, even overlap, between the violence that frames women’s lives in ordinary times, in perfectly banal household arrangements, and violence that erupts in a political upheaval, especially that created as the violence of nation-making.
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marking and nation-making. It is “the everyday world” that lends logic to the domestic battery of women; it is also the everyday world that provides the ready availability of logic, expressible in easy everyday speech, which render recovered women as “leftovers.” This story also puts in relief how it is “the everyday world” of nation formation that renders logical the abduction of women. The stylization of the narrative is such that the household story of Lajwanti’s abduction and recovery mirrors – laterally inverting as a mirror would – what would be the sequence of patriarchal logic of “woman as goddess” to “woman as victim” if we could schematize discursive history as a series of logical steps.

The story ends on an ominous note with two statements on Lajwanti. First: Lajwanti “withdrew into herself and stared at her body for the longest time, a body which, after partition of the country, was no longer hers, but that of a goddess” (27). And second: she was filled with “a nagging doubt, a misgiving,” which turned into a “chilling finality. And not because Sunder Lal had started mistreating her, but because he had started treating her with exceeding gentleness” (29). I think the two statements are intended to be read together because they explain each other. I have been arguing above that it is the symbolization of the nation as a woman/goddess that locates nation into flesh-and-blood female bodies, which renders the female body of “the other community/nation” as a logical location for abduction, rape and other forms of gender violence. Here, we see a reversal: the only way Sunder Lal can accept the abducted-and-recovered body of his wife back is by inverting the logic of this victimization to re-turn her body to that of a “goddess.” The violence that the female body went through in its transition from the goddess to the abducted woman is thus forcibly erased. It is, therefore, of critical importance that Lajwanti is not allowed to speak of her trauma. This process of goddess-making is also, however, historically imbricated with that of nation-making, and Lajwanti feels the violence that underwrites her becoming a goddess. This is why she is full of “misgiving” even though Sunder Lal stops beating her; the new gentle treatment from her husband she receives upon return is more unbearably violent to her than the beating she was used to earlier. This story, therefore, shows how an analysis of the woman of/in partition makes visible the violence of symbol-making, central to cultural nationalism, and provides us with an immanent critique of this process.

Partition of Bengal and the East Bengali refugee woman

Rich as the feminist insights we gain from scholarship above are, it is now necessary that partition studies expand the registers and locations that have been studied. Given the trajectory of my work on partition, let me start with the partition of Bengal as a case in point. Thus far, partition studies has, for the most part, meant partition experience in the western region. Punjab has come to be both the foundational and the paradigmatic “partition” experience of India. Because the east spoke to a different kind of experience of partition that lies outside the paradigm of partition set early by Punjab, except in a handful of notable exceptions it has very often been omitted from the purview of partition studies or has been assigned a marginal “mentionable exception” status.

Bagchi and Dasgupta (2003), however, make a strong intervention in this framing of partition by pointing out that Bengal offers the opportunity to tell a different story, with somewhat differently placed emphases and nuances, about the relationship of women with partition: considering the partition of Bengal does more than simply speak to a parochial interest or simply extend the canon. The expansion of field can significantly expand our understanding of the partition beyond the context of partition studies’ exclusive focus on the partition of Punjab. Bagchi and Dasgupta recognize the shared concerns and historical common ground
with Punjab: in both Punjab and Bengal, “women (minors included) were targeted as the prime object of persecution” (2003: 3). And in both places, noteworthy from a feminist vantage point is the role of women in rebuilding life. In addition, however, their editorial design and selection of material from Bengal provoke us to delve further to grapple with other dimensions relating to the relationship of women with patriarchy, nationalism and other “areas of civil society” (2003: 6). As they point out, the history of the political left in the newly formed West Bengal – in itself connected to the man-made famine in 1943 and the Tebhaga peasant rebellion from 1946 to 1948 – is inseparable from the partition story of Bengal. The undivided Communist Party India (henceforth, CP) played a strong role in influencing the refugee movement, and the refugee culture became inextricably intertwined with that of the left; the “refugee” population transformed Calcutta from a city of arm–chair babus devoted to genteel culture into a militant, angry, leftist city where middle class woman uprooted from their village homes came out to work” (Bagchi 2003: 27). This history, both material and discursive, critically inflects the experience of partition, including, of course, of women, in Bengal. Therefore, Bagchi and Dasgupta write, a “pronounced left impulse” has given “a very different flavour” (2003: 7) to the partition story of Bengal than to the story of enablement developed in the context of Punjab.

Using Bagchi and Dasgupta as a point of departure, I have examined the figure of the refugee woman to argue that the East Bengali refugee woman carries a radical potential which contests the constitution of woman as a symbol of the nation and signals or stages the struggle to push it toward that of a citizen-subject, a member of a political collective (Chakraborty 2010). The figure of the refugee woman and, indeed, the material history of refugee women in political and civic life in post-partition states, require us to imagine women as constitutive of a collective differently, because the refugee woman does not articulate her political struggle within, indeed often articulates against, the framework of nationalism. The figure of the refugee woman alerts us to forms of civic and political belonging, other than those conditioned and allowed by nationalism, to which woman must stake a claim.

Writings in the 1940s and 1950s by women who were members of the CP, or otherwise closely associated with it, many of whom were refugees, are particularly strong testimonials to this differently imagined relationship between women and the political world. This body of writing – by Manikuntala Sen, Chhabi Basu, Sulekha Sanyal and Sabitri Roy, to take a few important names – offers for us a different imagination of woman and the political collective. “Woman” in their writing is imagined as political subject and political agent. The woman stakes claims to the tasks of imagining and materializing a political collective in this body of writing as though nothing could have been more obvious for her to do. There is an always-already knowledge that the larger political questions of collectives are also gendered and therefore as much the woman’s to ask and answer as the man’s, although the imagination of any possible political participation is clearly understood as mediated by the gendered reality of the world. Not only in the case of women workers of the CP, their writings point to the involvement of refugee women of erstwhile middle-class, rural families, who would perhaps not participate in political activities, in communist politic and communist-led activisms for refugee demands in sheer needs of survival.

Their writing is an articulation of a politics where not only “the personal is the political,” but also one where the political is the personal. The approach to the collective by its women is not in their capacity as gender-less subjects; that is, the participation by these women is not in spite of or other than their being women. The claims the women make to the collective and the deep responsibility they feel to it are imagined from their gendered position as women. The intervention in politics is not, however, based on some presumed intrinsic “feminine values.”
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Rather, the possibility of intervention grows from a critical perspective developed by closely taking into account the “everyday” world and the gendered lived experience.

Partition scholarship points to the very high stake women must have in the political, including the politics of the outer world which decides whether we can live in a complex polity marked by religious difference, even when they remain marginal to power. When an event of catastrophic violence, such as partition, comes about, it is women, after all, who find their most personal, most private spaces, relationships, even the most intimate folds of their bodies, as the location of such catastrophe. It is also for this reason that I attach such critical importance to the figure of the refugee woman – both as a historical figure as well as an imaginary – as a participant agent in public politics. Dorothy Smith, when formulating the concept of the “everyday world,” comments that women’s experiences of realities are constituted by a “bifurcated consciousness” (1987: 6) of both the private and the public, the local and the global, the personal and the political. As Smith points out, it is, indeed, toward a critique of this constructed division that the feminist slogan “the personal is the political” was formulated (211). Bearing in mind the larger history of the partition and the history of the refugee women in West Bengal in particular – through which I view the partition, especially the way in which this history became entangled in political struggles, activism and party politics in the initial, formative years of the post-colonial state – I would argue that partition and the radical figure of the refugee woman provokes us to map and imagine how the political is also the personal.

Coda: future directions of partition studies

I would like to end this chapter by thinking about the future directions of partition studies. We could take the significance of bringing Bengal within the purview of partition studies more centrally as a case in point to show that what we understand as partition and what we learn from it will change significantly when partition studies extends to other locations. The partition experience of the eastern region in itself is not a uniform one. Many provinces in Bangladesh, on the one hand, and West Bengal and several states in the Indian northeast, on the other, share the border between India and Bangladesh. All along this border, in adjoining districts and states, we find complicated configurations and continuing negotiations of geographies, demographics, subjectivities, identities, linguistic and religious conflicts, all created by partition. Partition also impacted in critical ways many other provinces of British India and princely states that were not divided geographically: there were ethnic cleansings, refugee movements, changed demography of cities and villages, and alteration of cultures. Kashmir, which continues to be in a state of emergency, is one of these many states and provinces; North-West Frontier Province, Sindh, Bihar, Hyderabad, Assam, among others, have their own complex histories of partition. Although some good work has been done, these complexities have to be attended to in far greater detail and brought into the center of what partition studies frames as the “partition experience.”

Speaking as someone coming to partition from India, I would also emphatically argue that until scholarship focused on Pakistan and Bangladesh joins the field in larger numbers – to expand, question, interrupt, critique and redirect it – the field remains largely inadequate. As of now, the recent appearance of books and anthologies on partition that have included voices and concerns from both India and Pakistan is an enabling development in this direction (Zamindar 2007; Khan 2007; Kudaisya and Yong 2007). It is, of course, also possible that scholars working on Pakistan and Bangladesh may set different priorities and may wish to address partition as a larger problematic in an altogether different register than what happened in 1947. For instance, the emergence of a significant body of work on 1971, both literary and critical,
from both Pakistan and Bangladesh could be seen as a more urgent location of inquiry for them. Even so, when considered from the standpoint of partition scholarship, they add significantly to our understanding of partition. The reciprocity between partition studies and this body of work is clearly visible. A recent study of the 1971 War of Liberation of Bangladesh with gender as its focus, for example, develops its methodology by building on the work done in partition studies by Butalia and others (Saikia 2011). In turn it enriches the debates within partition studies by mediating further on the problems of gendered violence, people's experience of collective violence, identity formation in the context of ethnic nationalism, and history writing.

Notes

1 While the province of Punjab was partitioned in the west, in the east, Bengal was bifurcated into roughly two halves, one forming the state of West Bengal in India, the other East Pakistan. Other than Punjab and Bengal, a relatively small part of Assam, Sylhet, also went to East Pakistan. Geographically, the new state of Pakistan thus comprised two non-contiguous wings lying on either side of India, East and West Pakistan. Tension between East and West Pakistan started almost immediately after partition. In 1971, in the face of an incredibly bloody and violent occupation of East Pakistan by the (West) Pakistani army, the eastern wing fought its “Liberation War” to emerge as the independent state of Bangladesh.

2 I am deliberately using the term “banal” here, remembering the way Hannah Arendt formulates the “banality of evil” in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1964), insisting on the ordinary and the banal in relation to a political catastrophe: ordinary Germans – going about their everyday lives, following orders, fulfilling what they perceive as their office duties – who make possible the Nazi genocide of the Jews.


5 Later works on partition using oral history as a methodology include Meenakshie Verma (2004) and Nonica Datta (2009).


7 Mentionable are Bhaskar Sarkar (2009) and Kavita Daiya (2011).

8 See the chapter, “Borders and Bodies: Recovering Women in the Interest of the Nation” (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 65–130).

9 Pandey states, “It is my argument that in the history of any society, narratives of particular experiences of violence go towards making the ‘community’ – and the subject of history” (2001: 4). Further, based on the interviews of partitioned subjects, Pandey (2001: 188) elaborates:

   What is happening in all the above accounts, it seems to me, is a constitution of community through a discourse of “violence out there”. Violence happens – and can only happen – at the boundary of community. It marks those boundaries. It is the denial of violence “in our midst”, the attribution of harmony *within* and consignment of violence to the outside, that establishes “community”. Violence and community constitute each other, as it were. It is important to reiterate, however, that they do so in many different ways; that slippages occur in the very accounts that signal such a mutual constitution; and that the communities thus constructed are necessarily fragile and open to question, however much they come to be invoked in the wake of social and political turbulence.

10 Among many others, as three key books on this, see Partha Chatterjee (1993), Tanika Sarkar (2001) and Sumathi Ramaswamy (2010).

11 Other feminist scholars who have arrived at congruent conclusions are Veena Das (1995), Jasodhara Bagchi (2003) and Debali Mookerjea-Leonard (2003). See also in particular Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis (1996).

12 To be clear, however, their work is not the only one or the first to engage with the partition of Bengal. Earlier and contemporary works include Nilanjana Chatterjee (1992), Ranabir Samaddar (1997, 1999), Joya Chatterji (2002, 2007), Bidyut Chakrabarty (2004) and Gargi Chakravartty (2005). We also now
have the second volume of *The Trauma and the Triumph* (Bagchi et al. 2009). Literary anthologies include those edited by Debjani Sengupta (2003) and Bashabi Fraser (2006).

13 My own work is indebted, as I suspect would be that of anyone who is to take up the topic of the partition of Bengal, to *The Trauma and the Triumph*, Vol. 1. Nevertheless, I do not find useful the paradigm of the trauma and the triumph that the editors of the volume propose as a critical framework for understanding the gendered partition experience of Bengal. I certainly do not dispute the courageous history of the refugee women, but I find the conceptual binary set up by the two terms the trauma and the triumph, with implicit value judgments of negative–positive, reductive as a basis for understanding the experience of the Bengal partition, even if we take it in the most sophisticated sense of a dialectic. The risk always is that the negative–positive binary slips into a liberal, teleological story of progress from negative to positive: “the trauma and the triumph” too easily becomes the trauma to the triumph, which I do not find desirable as a critical framework.

**Bibliography**


