The Ethics of Refusal: Abduction, Trauma, and Subaltern Womanhood in n Partition Literature

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Abstract

The historical rupture of 1947, often termed as "The Partition of India," was one of the most grief-stricken and deadly massacres. The legacy of this historical divide generates a profound ethical discomfort whenever discussed, as most of its enduring consequences were disproportionately borne by abducted women, marked with the stigma of impurity and communal disgrace. While post Partition recovery operations sought to retrieve abducted women in the name of national honor and rehabilitation, these efforts frequently resulted in further psychological harm. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's Subaltern Theory, this paper examines how marginalized voices, particularly those of abducted women, remain silenced and excluded from dominant narratives, and how this structural invisibility compounds trauma. By placing an unnamed Sikh woman's testimony from Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* in dialogue with Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar,* the paper argues that recovery often intensified trauma by forcing women to abandon newly formed familial bonds while denying them meaningful reintegration into their natal communities. The study concludes by reading Puro's refusal of recovery not as submission or passivity but as an ethically justified response to irreversible loss and structural abandonment. By foregrounding women's testimonies and literary representation, the study challenges celebratory narratives of recovery and calls for a rethinking of rehabilitation as a site of continued domination rather than healing.

Keywords: Partition, Subaltern Theory, Abducted Women, Recovery Operations, Urvashi Butalia, Amrita Pritam

Introduction

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 registers the psychic collapse of Punjab as a cultural and emotional landscape fractured by violence. This catastrophic rupture produced widespread displacement, communal hatred, and irreparable psychological damage. While political histories often frame Partition as a necessary consequence of decolonization, and nation formation, such narratives obscure the human cost of this division, particularly the experiences of women whose bodies became sites of communal vengeance and nationalist symbolism.

Among the most marginalized victims were abducted women, whose suffering extended beyond physical violence into prolonged psychological trauma, social rejection, and enforced

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silence. Their bodies became symbolic terrains where communal honor and masculine revenge were violently asserted. Atrocity against women was not a new practice; history bears witness to physical, sexual, and psychological violence on women. Women have been victims of such brutalities since the Vedic age. Indian Epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* exemplify the longstanding maltreatment, torture, suppression, exploitation, and humiliation of women. Scholars such as Amrita Pritam and Urvashi Butalia have observed that women's suffering was not incidental but central to the logic of Partition violence, where the violation of women signified the humiliation of the rival community.

Amrita pritam a seminal figure in partition literature. Her poetry occupies a crucial position in the cultural memory of Partition, circulating a collective trauma that resists historical containment. Her iconic poem "*Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu"* (Today I Invoke Waris Shah) foregrounds women's suffering as central to Partition's violence, lamenting how Punjab's daughters were brutalised in the name of honor. Her reference to the "daughters of Punjab" exposes the magnitude of the brutal violence on women's bodies. This backward-reaching gesture in the poem reflects what Gayatri Spivak's Subaltern Theory describes as the structural silencing of marginalized voices—those whose experiences of violence and oppression are excluded from dominant historical and cultural narratives. This theoretical lens allows for a re-reading of Partition not as a concluded historical episode but as a site where subaltern subjects, particularly women, remain unheard and structurally constrained. In this context, post-Partition recovery operations emerge as particularly fraught interventions, often reproducing violence under the guise of rehabilitation.

Literature Review

Scholarship on the Partition of India has increasingly shifted from political and administrative histories to an engagement with lived experiences, memory, and trauma. Early historiographical accounts largely foregrounded diplomatic negotiations and state formation, often marginalizing the voices of ordinary individuals— particularly women. Feminist historians and literary scholars have since challenged this silence by foregrounding gendered experiences of Partition violence.

Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* marks a crucial intervention in Partition studies by privileging oral testimonies over official archives. Butalia demonstrates how abducted women were doubly victimized—first through communal violence and later through state sponsored recovery operations. Her work exposes the emotional and psychological costs of recovery, revealing how women's consent and subjectivity were systematically ignored. By recording women's narratives of loss, motherhood, and rejection, Butalia destabilizes nationalist narratives that frame recovery as a moral success.

Amrita Pritam's literary contributions further enrich this discourse by offering affective and imaginative representations of women's trauma. Poems such as "Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu" mourn the collective suffering of Punjabi women and position their pain as central to Partition's ethical failure. In *Pinjar*, Pritam fictionalizes the experience of abduction and social rejection through the character of Puro, whose refusal to return challenges dominant

ideals of honor, purity, and rehabilitation. Scholars have noted that Pritam's work resists sentimental closure and instead foregrounds irreversible loss and emotional dislocation.

Theoretical engagement with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak*? Provides a critical framework for understanding the structural silencing of abducted women. Spivak argues that subaltern subjects, particularly women, are denied the conditions necessary for their speech to be recognized within dominant power structures. Applied to Partition recovery narratives, this framework reveals how women's voices were overwritten by nationalist and patriarchal discourses.

While existing scholarship has examined Partition trauma, fewer studies explicitly read women's refusal of recovery as an ethical act. This paper seeks to bridge that gap by placing historical testimony and literary representation in dialogue to argue that refusal functions as a meaningful response to structural abandonment.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative methodology grounded in literary analysis, feminist historiography, and postcolonial theory. Rather than relying on quantitative data, the paper employs close textual reading and comparative analysis to examine how trauma, agency, and silencing are represented across historical testimony and literary fiction.

Primary texts include Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* and Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*, supplemented by Pritam's poem "Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu." These texts are analyzed to trace thematic intersections between lived experience and literary imagination, particularly in relation to abduction, recovery, and refusal. The unnamed Sikh woman's testimony is treated not merely as historical evidence but as a narrative that exposes emotional truths excluded from official discourse.

The theoretical framework is informed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity. Spivak's insights are used to interrogate the limits of voice, agency, and representation in both state-sponsored recovery operations and cultural narratives. Feminist readings of Partition history further guide the analysis by foregrounding gendered violence and patriarchal structures.

By placing testimonial history in conversation with fiction, the methodology emphasizes interdisciplinary, allowing literature to illuminate historical silences and history to contextualize literary representation. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of refusal not as passivity, but as an ethically charged response to irreversible trauma and systemic marginalization.

Recovery Operations as "A Moral Duty"

In response to the widespread abduction of women during the Partition of 1947, India and Pakistan signed the InterDominion Treaty on 6 December 1947 to facilitate their recovery. Although framed as a humanitarian initiative, the recovery programme was structured by nationalist and moral discourses that prioritized collective honor over women's agency and psychological well-being. State rhetoric frequently invoked cultural myths such as the figure

of Sita from the *Ramayana*, portraying recovery as a moral obligation and reducing abducted women to symbolic bearers of national purity.

The absence of a clear definition of "abduction" rendered recovery deeply coercive. After March 1, 1947, any woman found living with a man of another religious community was presumed abducted, irrespective of consent, emotional bonds, or motherhood. Recovery was carried out forcibly, often in defiance of women's resistance and distress. Spivak's Subaltern Theory illuminates how such interventions systematically silence subaltern subjects, rendering women's voices invisible and their consent irrelevant. The structural inequities underlying recovery operations reproduce domination and compound marginalisation.

As Urvashi Butalia documents, women's voices were systematically disregarded in the recovery process, rendering them passive objects of state policy. Over nine years, approximately 22,000 Muslim women were recovered from India and about 8,000 Hindu and Sikh women from Pakistan. These figures obscure the profound psychic costs of recovery, revealing how state-sponsored rehabilitation institutionalized trauma rather than resolving it.

A Real Testimony: Trauma beyond Abduction

In *The Other Side of Silence,* Urvashi Butalia records the testimony of an unnamed Sikh woman abducted during Partition and later recovered through state intervention. After her abduction, the woman was forced into a marriage with a Muslim man and lived with him for several years. During this period, she became a mother and gradually adapted to a life shaped by coercion but also emotional attachment. When recovery teams arrived, she resisted return, distressed by the prospect of being separated from her children. Nevertheless, she was forcibly taken back to India.

Upon her return, the woman encountered rejection rather than acceptance. Her natal family viewed her as socially impure and emotionally disruptive, unwilling to reintegrate her fully into their household. The testimony reveals that her deepest marginalization emerged not during abduction but during recovery—when she was compelled to abandon her children and confront the collapse of familial belonging.

Through Spivak's lens, this testimony illustrates the structural silencing of the subaltern. The woman's suffering resurfaces most intensely during recovery, when her agency is ignored and her voice remains unheard. Recovery thus operates as a site of continued domination, compelling the survivor to endure systemic injustice rather than facilitating healing.

From Testimony to Fiction: Puro's Story in *Pinjar*

Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* offers a literary articulation of the historical realities documented by Butalia. The protagonist, Puro, is abducted as an act of communal revenge and violently removed from her familial and social world. When she attempts to return home, her parents refuse to accept her, prioritizing social honor over her emotional survival. This rejection transforms abduction into permanent displacement, mirroring the experience of the unnamed Sikh woman in Butalia's account.

Like the woman in the testimony, Puro exists in a luminal space—belonging neither to her natal family nor fully to her imposed new life. Her silence, emotional withdrawal, and eventual refusal to return reflect the subaltern's inability to participate meaningfully in dominant narratives. Puro's experience demonstrates that the loss inflicted by Partition is not recoverable through return, as the social and emotional conditions necessary for reintegration no longer exist.

Recovery as Structural Silencing

Both Butalia's testimony and *Pinjar* expose the ethical failure of recovery operations. In each case, women's consent is disregarded, and their experiences are subordinated to nationalist agendas. Recovery demands conformity to pre-Partition identities that no longer hold meaning for subaltern subjects who have endured irreversible loss.

From a Spivakian perspective, recovery enacts structural silencing rather than resolution. The forced return of abducted women compels them to confront an oppressive past while denying them agency in the present. This process intensifies marginalization rather than facilitating healing.

Justifying Puro's Refusal

Puro's refusal of recovery in *Pinjar* must be read not as defeat or submission but as an ethically justified response to structural abandonment. Like the unnamed Sikh woman who resists separation from her children, Puro recognizes that return offers no restoration—only renewed marginalization. Her refusal acknowledges the impossibility of returning to a world that systematically silences and neglects subaltern subjects.

By choosing to remain where she is, Puro asserts a constrained form of agency within oppressive circumstances. Her decision challenges nationalist narratives that equate return with redemption and exposes the limitations of recovery as a moral solution. In Spivakian terms, Puro refuses to be spoken for; she resists the imposition of dominant discourses that erase her lived reality.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that post-Partition recovery operations often intensified trauma rather than alleviating it, particularly for abducted women whose voices were systematically silenced. Through a comparative reading of Urvashi Butalia's historical testimony and Amrita Pritam's Pinjar, the study has demonstrated how recovery functioned as a mechanism of structural domination rooted in nationalist and patriarchal ideologies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Subaltern Theory provides a crucial framework for understanding why women's consent and emotional realities were rendered irrelevant within official rehabilitation narratives. By reading an unnamed Sikh woman's testimony from *The Other Side of Silence* alongside *Pinjar*, this paper has argued that Partition trauma persisted through recovery rather than being resolved by it. Gayatri Spivak's Subaltern Theory illuminates how structural marginalization and the silencing of women exacerbate their suffering. Puro's refusal of recovery emerges as a powerful ethical stance—one that recognizes the impossibility of returning to a world that has already rejected her. Together, historical testimony and literary

representation demand a rethinking of recovery, not as healing, but as a site of continued domination and silencing of women. Ultimately ,Partition cannot be understood solely as a historical event; it remains an ongoing ethical crisis whose unresolved traumas continue to shape cultural memory. Listening to subaltern voices, even when they refuse dominant narratives, is essential to any meaningful engagement with this legacy.

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