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# Being Abject: Identity Politics and the Fallen Woman of Partition

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**Abstract:** The ubiquity of victimization of women in times of ethnic frenzy, civil war or any type of mass conflict is now widely acknowledged; it spans time, place and culture.Literary studies in this area are paramount in politicizing gendered violence as a social and not an individual problem, identifying it discursively and bringing it to public consciousness. Official data records that during the communal riots following the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, about 100000 women are abducted, killed, raped and subsequently banished. Personal data and oral narratives claim this number to be higher. In the recovery missionstarting from December 1947 to March 1952, thousands of women are repatriated fromboth the countries. The pace of recovery slowed due to many factors, one major being many women arerejected by their families and communities. Using Julia Kristeva's concept of the 'abject'from her book *The Powers of Horror* (1982), I examine how these women are rendered abject, a thing of ignominious filth,and how this abjecthood moves across culture, society, body, politics and psyche through a literary study of partition texts like Rajinder Singh Bedi's 'Lajwanti' and Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning*.

**Key words:** Abject, woman, society, partition, history, text.

The history of the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 is replete with staggering data of thousands of lives lost, migration of millions, communal strife, holocaust and carnage. Underlying this documented history, lies the untold saga of pain, loss, hardships, despair and trauma affecting the people of the land. In the strife following the decision of dividing the country into two nation states on the precinct of religion, eons of mutual rivalry and distrust get meted out

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in mass killing, destruction of private properties and appropriation of women. Women are usually seen as signifiers of religious and cultural ideology and honour and their bodies operate as ethnic and national boundaries (Anthias and Yuval Davis, 1989: 1480). Unsurprisingly, during the partition holocaust, woman's identity as repository of culture of the nation, marker of the purity of society and bearer of future generation mark her a potential victim for the rival community. Thousands of women are abducted, killed, raped and are subsequently banished. Menon and Bhasin, in their book, claim that the official number of abducted women stood at 50,000 for Muslim women kidnapped by Hindu and Sikh men on their way to Pakistan, while 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women are abducted as they attempted to migrate to India (1998: 70). Urvashi Butalia gives similar numbers; a total of 75,000 women are abducted from both sides of the border (1998: 3).Sharmistha De Dutta explains the overlapping tropes of 'roots' and 'routes' in the context of partition and writes that"as a result of migratory movement and displacement from one's place of origin, the notion of one's place of belonging is contested and the issue of crossing border, both literally and metaphorically ─ has often been fore grounded"(Dutta, 2016:18). The uprooting, migration and the struggle to be incorporated as the citizen of a new nation thus consist of a complex process and is not devoid of ambiguities, specially in the case of the abducted women.

The issue of abducted women becomes so pressing that the government of both the countries take initiative to restore these citizens to their respective rightful states. In the Inter-Dominion Conference in December, 1947, Indian Prime Minister Nehru and Pakistani Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan ratify an agreement establishing the recovery procedure of the abducted women. The job of compiling claims for abducted women by their relatives falls on the Central Recovery Offices in both countries. The task of locating abducted women is given to local police who would be assisted with the guidance of the abducted women's relatives. Social workers and District Liaison Officers (DLOs) who are appointed by the Liaison Agency of the opposite Punjab government also lend aid. Non-Muslim women recovered from Pakistan are housed in District transit camps, the Central camp being in Lahore. A similar camp is established for Muslim women in Jalandhar. The Indian and Pakistani Military Evacuation Organisations (MEOs) are established to guard and escort women to their respective countries (Major, 1995: 64-65).

The apparent benevolent act to restore the abducted women and to re-integrate them in their natal families is however not devoid of ambiguities. The states act as omnipotent big brothers and decide to deport the figures brutally, contravening any personal opinion of the women. Many women who are settled in new homes, have children in new relation, are unwilling to be uprooted again. But they have to be reclaimed as they are seen as the missing members of a community and not as adult citizens who have a right of choice. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin writes that the Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Bill deny the women, 'their rights as citizens' (Menon and Bhasin, 1997) Stephen Morton, explains how state in its act, cannot disregard the nexus of patriarchy and communal ideology and one more time woman's voice is silenced, "[a]lthough . . . the recovery process might seem like a worthy cause that counteracts the abduction and violation of women, it is also complicit in the maintenance of national boundaries and discourses of ethnic purity" (2012: 48).

Recoveries eventually slow down owing to a number of facts. Hindu and Sikh refugees in India mistakenly think that the number of abducted non-Muslim women exceeds the number of abducted Muslim women. They mount a public campaign and demand that Muslim women be held up from recoveries as hostages. Eventually the two countries agree not to publicize the figures of women repatriated. India and Pakistan's rivalry also slows the pace of recoveries. (Major, 65) Pakistan claims that the slowing of recoveries is because many Hindus refuse to take back their women as they consider them 'defiled', an argument which Nehru accepts while accusing Pakistan of being uncooperative. Many women also refuse to be recovered, fearing shame and rejection by their families and communities. Butalia in her essay "Questions of Sexuality and Citizenship during Partition" (1997: 97) claims that post recovery, there were 75,000 unattached women. Unattached by the state's definition meant any woman who did not have menfolk to provide for and protect her.

The saga of the fallen woman been rejected and their social deaths being a routine in partition history is validated in stories and novels interwoven with facts of the time and the seminal works of the researchers on oral narratives. The phenomenon of rejection of the recovered women by their natal kin owing to the belief that the women are defiled and hence have lost their rightful

place in family and society can be studiedin Jyotirmoyee Devi's novella *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, (*The River Churning* in translation). The narration begins with the protagonist Sutara reflecting on the omission of the history of pain and loss, of the privation of common people in general and the plight of women in particular. True to the initial title, *Itihashe Stree Parva*, or "The Woman Chapter in History''the novel studies the unwritten history of the nature of persecution of woman during the Partition and goes deep into the question of the victimised woman's subsequent losses- loss of family, homeland, identity, social agency and the right of choice. The protagonist loses her parents and sister in the in the riots of the Noakhali district of East Bengal in the autumn of 1946. She loses consciousness in the course of the carnage escaping corporeal harm miraculously and recuperates in the house of family friend and neighbour Tamizzudin. Her kin, her brothers and their family who migrated on the other side do not take any effort to bring her back. To her surviving relatives, she is as good as dead. Sheltered in alien community's refuge, she is now tarnished, a part of the filth. Although after six months she crosses border to reunite with her kin with the initiative of Tamizzudin, natural assimilation into her natal community is not possible anymore. Sutara's sense of relief in the prospect of returning to her kin is brutally shattered as she faces immediate antagonism from the householders. Her sister in law's mother and aunt strongly disapprove her presence in their house. In view of the staunch upholders of community's purity and honour, Sutara, has lost her lineage and birth right. Escaping corporeal harm is not a relief as her prolonged contact with the rival community family has branded her as 'polluted'. In her physical entity she bears an alterity, something unnatural and uncanny which is felt to be a threat to the sanctity of her natal community. Routinely shunned from social events, she is eschewed from auspicious ceremonies like marriages and is sitted for dinner alone in a separate room so as to save others from her polluting presence. As an act of circumventing her problematic presence in the household, she is eventually sent to a boarding school. In the course of the narrative, Sutara completes education and becomes economically independent, yet she can never really reintegrate in her natal family and remains a forever fugitive figure.

In the partition holocaust, women of the subcontinent face multiple victimhood. Social death or exclusion from society is one of them. The presence of the violated woman is seen as a threat to

the established known norms of the society, of a possible breakdown of the order within which the regular conventions of the patriarchal ideals operate. When a woman is raped and/or abducted, it can be stated that her "sexuality was no longer comprehensible, or acceptable" (Butalia, 1998: 190). In their documentation of oral narratives, Urvashi Butalia, Kamala Bhasin and Ritu Menon write about many instances of victimisation as women are abducted, raped, rejected by family, are compelled to commit suicide and even killed by kin on the pretext of retaining familial honour. These accumulating histories of violence and social death in the period urge Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru to address the issue. Mahatma Gandhi says at a prayer meeting on 7 December 1947:

> It is being said that the families of the abducted women no longer want to receive them back. It would be a barbarian husband or a barbarian parent who would say that he would not take back his wife or daughter. I do not think the women concerned had done anything wrong. They had been subjected to violence. To put a blot on them and to say that they are no longer fit to be accepted in society is unjust. (Gandhi, 9)

On 26 December 1947, he again urges:

> Even if the girl has been forced into marriage by a Muslim, even if she had been violated, I would still take her back with respect. I do not want that a single Hindu or Sikh should take up the attitude that if a girl has been abducted by a Muslim she is no longer acceptable to society.... If my daughter had been violated by a rascal and made pregnant, must I cast her and her child away? ...Today we are in such an unfortunate situation that some girls say that they do not want to come back, for they know that if they return they will only face disgrace and humiliation. The parents will tell them to go away, so will the husbands. (Gandhi, 117-118)

And in January 1948, the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru also makes a similar plea.

> I am told that there is an unwillingness on the part of their relatives to accept those girls and women (who have been abducted) back in their homes. This is a most objectionable and wrong attitude to take and any social custom that supports this attitude must be condemned. These girls

and women require our tender and loving care and their relatives should be proud to take them back and give them every help." (Hindustan Times, 17thJanuary, 1948, Cited in Menon and Bhasin, 1998)

The repeated appeals from the leaders of the nation, the state sponsored homes for the abandoned women, testify the prevalent custom of ostracising the so-called fallen women of partition holocaust. Rajinder Singh Bedi's 'Lajwanti'explores the same problematic dynamics of offering space to the expatriate women of partition in family and society. The poser of what to do with these women and the indeterminateness of their fate becomes apparent in Bedi's narrative. 'Lajwanti', Babu Sunderlal's wife is abducted by the men of the rival community and is compelled to live in exile for quite some time. She is eventually rescued and returned to her husband during the recovery drive. Importantly, Sunderlal is the secretary of a recovery committee that takes up the laudable and much needed task of rehabilitating abducted women. The reason for electing Sunderlal as secretary, which occurs prior to Lajwanti's return, the narrator explains, is that "according to Sadar Sahib, the lawyer, the old petitioner of Chauki Kalan and other well-respected people of the locality, no one could be trusted to do the job with greater zeal and commitment than Sunderlal because his own wife had been abducted" (69).Thus, Sunderlal becomes the sole spokesman for the project. Apparently pining for his wife, he however does not know how to react when she eventually comes back: "For Sunderlal, the thought of confronting his wife, who has been raped and abducted, is strangely disturbing" (79-80). Ultimately, Sunderlal cannot reject Lajwanti, but she becomes a means by which he can display an ideology that he espouses but does not have the courage to embrace fully, as evidenced by the restrictions that he puts on their relationship—primarily that they will never have conjugal relations.

To render this new relationship with Lajwanti viable, Sunderlal symbolically reincarnates her as a goddess. He cannot accept a defiled wife who spent months in an alien community, "honors" her as if she is a deity, while returning to their previous relationship is impossible. In the process, Lajwanti is forbidden from meeting her emotional and psychological needs. She becomes goddess whose primary purpose in the relationship is to showcase her husband's principles. The

narrator comments: “He enshrined Lajo like a golden idol in the temple of his heart and guarded her like a jealous devotee. . ... Sunderlal no longer called her Lajo. He addressed her ‘Devi’” (80-81). This uncertainty regarding these women is fostered on their abstruse identity in patriarchy and can be examined through the concept of ‘abject’ propounded by Julia Kristeva in her seminal work, *The Powers of Horror*(1982).The term ‘abjection’ literally means "the state of being cast off." The term has been explored in post structuralism as that which inherently disturbs conventional identity and cultural concepts. (Childers and Hentzi, 1) In her interpretation of abjection, Kristeva describes subjective horror (abjection) as the feeling when an individual is confronted by (both mentally and as a body), what Kristeva terms one's "corporeal reality", or a breakdown in the distinction between what is self and the Other. The abject is neither subject nor object, it is an ambiguity which hovers ‘on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject" (Kristeva, 207).According to Kristeva, this phenomenon is restricted not only to an individual, but also to a community, society or a subject state. To understand how the quarantined women of partition become abject figures, one has to have an understanding of what are they now? Subjects they never were, objects of need they are not now. Recovered women like Lajwanti and Sutara are, taking from Lacan, figures ‘grounded in filth’, shunned by society – neither subject nor object. Drawing from Kristeva, we can locate them as abject, some ambiguous entity, ‘which cannot be assimilated.’ (Kristeva 1)From the perpetrator’s perspective, the very intent behind their victimization is to render them abject and through them the communities they belong to.From their kin’s perspective,they are abject as they are now a menace to them. Dead or lost, they could have beeneasily obliterated from family and society’s history and would not pose any threat. Rather they could easily be stamped as martyrs, the immolated daughters of the nation. In that way, the sanctity of society would also remain untainted and unthreatened. But now the returning women pose a threat to the same society. Given these contexts, in Bedi’s tale, Lajwanti’s name accrues particular importance. Lajwanti means shy or demure. It is also the name of a plant whose leaves curl up when touched—that is, it dies symbolically—and, significantly, the story opens and closes with a refrain mentioning this that members of Sunderlal’s rehabilitation committee sing religiously during

processions: “Do not touch Lajwanti / For she will curl up/ And die . . .!” (68, 82). The import of this phrase is clear: Lajwanti should, like the plant, have perished out of sheer shame and despair because her honor was violated. That she does not die but strives to survive and shamelessly returns to her family is therefore not acceptable.

In Jyotirmoyee Devi’s tale, at first, attempts are made to push the protagonist at the very margin. She is excluded from family occasions, ignored and ultimately made invisible by putting into a boarding school. The dilemma is not only that she is now polluted, but the threat that her touch would pollute the other householders. Abject is this thing which is not only filthy but also threatens to disrupt the cautiously created pure household aka community. The entire politics of rejection of the abducted protagonist of the tale and of numerous such girls in partition history is also based on this stringently maintained difference between the self and the impure other (here, a differing community) and in the belief that touching a filth, a person becomes filthy; not only a part of the body but the entire being becoming unclean, is a belief deep rooted in religion. Touched by a member of the other community and staying in their association for a few days, Sutara is not only ‘polluted’, buther presence is also a threat to the normalcy her family aspires to. If she is given refuge and is reintegrated, the entire family would be ostracized and would be sucked into that abjection. As implored by the elders of the household, the other girls of the family would then also be marked as part of the muck and their position in the community would be likewise threatened.

Kristeva defines abjection as a simultaneous fascination and repulsion toward corporeal reminders, reminders which Kristeva argues are rooted in the subject’s primal relation to the mother. For Kristeva, the intolerable or abject are impure objects such as body leaks, wastes and fluid in violation of the desire and hope for the ‘clean and proper body’ thus making the boundaries and limitations of our selfhood ambiguous. It should be noted in the present context that ‘abject’ is not merely the pathological. In a culture that celebrates order, hierarchy and guarded borders, abjects are also those which do not conform to the closely guarded set of rules; they are negated as disgusting, repelling and anxiety-provoking. It is noted how the abject is articulated within a hygienic discourse as dirt or filth. Something similar seems to be the case also in religious discourse in which the distinction between holiness and fallenness intertwines with a distinction between

purity and impurity. The rendering of abjecthood therefore has roots in society, religion, body and psyche. In their defilement, the fallen woman of partition embodies this impurity which poses a menace to the closely guarded structure of society, religion, community and psyche of the upholders of all these strictly protected edifices. Abjects are therefore primarily seen as what portendsthe indorsed normality of a particular community structure. The defiled women, by their mere presence, threatens to jeopardize this normality and in their embodiment of this threat, are rendered abject.

Diken, considering how rape victims in Bosnian war become abject bodies, however propounds that the distinction between purity and impurity is secondary in abject, the most basic attribute of the abject is not its impurity but formlessness and drawing from Kristeva, advocates that the abject arethose uncanny objects which are familiar, yet strange, are both human and inhuman, both interior and exterior, both repelling and fascinating, without form, and hence dangerous and taboo(Diken, 2005:116-117).The indistinct abject undermines our well-established distinctions, our culture and our identity (Kristeva, 69). And, inversely, the practice of avoiding the abject serves to uphold a culture and a tradition. We have form on one side and the lack of it on the other (Kristeva, 1982: 65).The very core of the problem with the returning women resides also in their formlessness, they are these inside out, neither here, nor there figures. Their unmistakable presence cannot be ignored; yet, this presence is perilous and cannot be conformed to. They have become abject, as abject according to Kristeva, is a forever ambiguous entity, a threat which is 'beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable'.(Kristeva, 1)In this ambiguity, in the very fact that society cannot totally assimilate them nor can totally exclude them, they are rendered abject, the abject being 'a thing which beseeches, worries, and fascinates' (Kristeva, 1982:1) The broad dimension of abjection is often used to describe marginalized groups and can thus be narrowed down to women. In particular, 'those women who do not succeed in meeting the expectations of society, the so-called grotesque women.' (Cellier, 2013:5) The concept of the unnatural can also be applied on these women; they are familiar because they carry traces of women, but they are at the same time extraneous because their self has become un-womanly by patriarchal standard. In Bedi's story Lajwanti after her return seemed to be different to Sunderlal. He is almost in awe of the girl; she is

similar but not the same girl he married and often mistreated. The abject is similarly suspended in between familiar and strange and in this duality, the concept of abjection can also be linked to the Freudian idea of 'the uncanny' or 'das unheimliche' (Sandner, 76), the notion of something being at the same time foreign yet, familiar which results in the creation of cognitive dissonance.

Kristeva defines the abject as representing a threat that meaning is breaking down and that which constitutes our reaction to such a breakdown. The abject has to do with "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (*Powers,* 4). Likewise, the abducted women as abject threaten to jeopardise the collective identity. Society does not know where to place them and their rejection is essential to define and defend the boundaries of identity-personal, collective and social. Iris Marion Young points out that marginalized groups, such as people of colour and homosexuals, often become the victims of an aesthetic that 'defines some groups as ugly or fearsome and produces aversive reactions in relation to members of those groups' (1990: 145). This association between groups and abject matter is socially constructed; and as Young writes, "once the link is made the theory of abjection describes how these associations lock into the subject's identities and anxieties". In likewise manner, when the abject is the alien community, identity is fostered on the distinction between the self and the other and these identities are always fraught with continuous anxieties to be separated from the other. Kristeva cites crimes like Nazi concentration camps as abject. She mentions crimes of Auschwitz as they draw attention to the "fragility of the law" (1982: 4). In a similar pattern, the fallen women of Partition are abject as they underscore the fragility of the conventional community structure and a threat to the ostensibly defined borders between the self and the other. "[w]omen's bodies represented both the inner core of patriarchy — couched in the language of honor and prestige — as well as marking boundaries of social and national reproduction" (Abraham, 2014: 42). In keeping with this argument, abduction and rape are here not just provoked by a gang of hooligans' sexual perversion, rather it is a strategy, even if not premeditated, employed with great effect, tool for ethnic cleansing. Rape and abduction aim to devalue the most treasured object of men and turn it into abject.

Kristeva writes that there has always been attempts to purify the abject, "The various means of *purifying* the abject—the various catharses make up the history of religions." (1982:17) The

nationalist policy of recovering the fallen woman where the state as omnipotent big brother engages into a forcible recovery can be seen as an attempt of purifying the abject women, a means of setting things right. In Jyotirmoyee Devi's tale, the society pushes the abject girl outside as she poses a threat to its pure subjectivity while Bedi's tale goes a step further to show means of purifying the abject in order to retain the subjectivity of the near kin of the protagonist. The goddess trope used to make these women viable in society is another way of purifying the abject. National political discourses too, not surprisingly, deploys the myth that the partition's female victims are to be seen as goddesses. For instance, advocating for a national recovery mission in 1949, one member of India's parliament urges: "As descendants of Ram we have to bring back every Sita that is alive" (Menon and Bhasin, 68).With the huge gap between recovered women's reality and such deification of them providing the background for "Lajwanti," the story shows how the goddess trope worsens survivors' lives. As the protagonist, Lajwanti is brought home during the recovery mission, her husband, Sunderlal, accepts her back, but under conditions that he dictates.A key passage describing Lajwanti's return echoes the minister's comment ironically: "Sunderlal took Lajo by her hand and began walking back towards his home. The scene was a re-enactment of the old story about Ramchandra leading Sita back to Ayodhya after years of exile" (80).Sunderlal reassures Lajwanti, who is initially apprehensive about her reception when she returns, in part because he had always mistreated her: "Let us forget the past! You didn't do anything sinful, did you? Our society is guilty because it refuses to honor women like you as goddesses" (82). Rather than signifying a loving embrace; however, Sunderlal's pronouncement is a rejection masquerading as principled beneficence. Lajwanti, who had endured physical and psychological violence from strangers is met again with insidious psychological aggression at home. Ttraumatized, Lajwanti is bewildered by this turn of events but eventually understands that she will never have the right to be human: "Lajwanti's sorrow had remained locked up in her breast. Helplessly, she had gazed at her body and had realized that, since Partition, it was no longer her own body but the body of a goddess. She wanted to be Lajo again" (82).

Both the protagonists of Jyotirmoyee Devi's and Bedi's narratives are rejected by their kin. A society is defined as much by what it accepts as by what it rejects.The rejected lead to abjection

because she reminds the viewer of the frailty of the symbolic order, on which life of an autonomous subject depends and what fosters its identity. In Freud's vocabulary, the object is totem and the abject taboo. Yet, both object and abject facilitate the subject's identity. Here, the subject society is defined by the object it upholds, in this case the unsullied women of the nation, it is also established by the abject it pushes outside, in this case its defiled women. In order to establish one's identity, one has to negate a part of oneself which poses a threat to its entire being.Encounters with the abject endanger personal and collective identity as it impends the border of the subject. According to Jones (2007:63) 'Abject beings are pushed beyond the margins of subjecthood, but they may also push back, challenging the stability of readable and enforceable norms.'As a fallout, however, abjection is also a part of the dynamics of subject formation. Referring to the abject and abjection as "safeguards" and "primers of my culture" (Kristeva, 2), Kristeva's concept suggests that this mechanism works for individuals as well as for an entire culture. In the present context, the subject can be read as the pure community, the fallen woman being an ambiguous part of it, severing of whom is an unavoidable necessity to retain the structure of the former. Negation of the women can be read as a 'psychic strategy that the subject uses to fight the destabilizing impact of the abject to reaffirm his or her identity" (Kutzbach and Mueller, 2007: 5). The male, through rejection or murder, takes upon himself this obligatory task and the womenfolk, as products of the same ideology, often consent. The patriarchs as protectors and saviours of the community honour and national pride thus do their duty and the path to a pure land, pure community and pure self is paved.

An important trope of the discourse on the mass victimization of women has always been the manner in which woman is objectified, her identity being fostered on male expectations. Whether she is seen as the insignia of wealth and virility of the male or donned a goddess, she is never equal to her male counterpart. In this critical tract, women as objects are akin to Lacan's "object of desire" or the '*objet* petit' which allows the subject to coordinate his desire, a tool which lets the subject some kind of 'recognition' as Lacan propounds "The necessary and sufficient reason for the repetitive insistence of these desires in the transference and their permanent remembrance in a signifier that repression has appropriated – that is, in which the repressed returns – is found if one accepts the idea that in these determinations the desire for recognition dominates the desire that is to

be recognised, preserving it as such until it is recognised". (1996: 431) According to Lacan therefore, the object of desire facilitates the richness, power and virility of the subject not only to others but more importantly to himself. This object of desire is in direct contrast to Kristeva's understanding of the "abject". Whereas the *objet petit* allows a subject to coordinate his or her desires, the abject "is radically excluded'. But interestingly, both aid to subject formation. The defiled woman is rendered abject by society. Once a part of the community, now she becomes an alien other. Owned by a male, she is an object and a thing of desire, marked by another male, she is now abject, a thing of ignominious filth. Her separation and alienation from the community are necessary to form the subjecthood of the later. In the desire for achieving something and in the urge to be separated from something, identity is fostered. Caught in the dynamics of subject formation, be it of nation, state, community or individual, it can be observed from the discussed narratives how woman in Partition moves from being object to abject, and how, she is kept oscillating in between these two conflicting identities.

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