

# Contextualizing Kamla Patel's *Torn from the Roots*: A Historical Examination of Personal Narrative

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Kamla Patel's memoir *Torn from the Roots* by placing it in the context of the history of Partition violence. It looks at the ideological underpinning of the Recovery Operation that did not allow women to choose if they wanted to be 'recovered' and relocated once again. The memoir is seen to reflect many of the contentious debates surrounding women's agency. Kamla Patel's intervention concerning separating mothers from their children is seen as particularly significant. Her memoir written 27 years after her experiences as the government representative in Lahore helping to locate and recover abducted women acts as a powerful text that seeks to expand the archive for feminist historiography of India's partition.

**KEYWORDS:** Partition, Historiography, Memoir, Recovery, Children.

## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1946, as British India hurtled toward independence and partition, communal tensions surged, culminating in two of the most violent riots in the subcontinent's history: the Great Calcutta Killings and the Noakhali Riots. On August 16, 1946, the city of Calcutta erupted in violence following the All India Muslim League's call for Direct Action Day to demand a separate Muslim state. What began as a protest soon escalated into a bloodbath as Hindu and Muslim mobs clashed, resulting in widespread looting, arson, and killing. The city was engulfed in chaos, with estimates of the death toll reaching into the thousands, leaving Calcutta scarred by the brutality. Just two months later, in October 1946, the violence spread to Noakhali, a district in Bengal, where Hindu communities were targeted in a series of horrific attacks. The Noakhali Riots saw organized, violent assaults, including murder, rape, and forced conversions, particularly affecting the Hindu population. The brutal nature of the riots and the failure of authorities to contain them highlighted the deep-seated communal animosities that would be exacerbated by the impending partition. Both riots underscored the severe consequences of the communal divisions and foreshadowed the widespread upheaval that would follow the partition of India in 1947.

In March 1947, the British government, facing increasing unrest and political pressure, appointed Lord Louis Mountbatten as the last Viceroy of India to oversee the transition of power. On June 3, 1947, he announced the plan for the partition of British India into two independent dominions: India and Pakistan. The plan, known as the Mountbatten Plan, was based on the principle of dividing the country along religious lines. In the same month Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer and the Chairman of the Boundary Commissions, was appointed to draw the boundaries that would divide British India into India and

Pakistan. Radcliffe had no prior knowledge of India and its complex demographics, and his task was to create a line that would minimize communal conflict. Radcliffe and his team worked under intense pressure and with limited time. They were tasked with drawing the boundaries in the provinces of Punjab and Bengal, which had mixed populations and were particularly contentious. Radcliffe's boundary lines had to account for not only the religious demographics but also geographical and administrative considerations. In July 1947 the Indian Independence Act was passed by the British Parliament, formalizing the partition plan. It set August 15, 1947, as the date for the transfer of power. On August 15, 1947, India gained independence and was officially divided into two countries by the Radcliffe Line: The Union of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (Muslim-majority), which consists of two geographically separated regions, West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). On August 17, 1947, the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the first Governor-General of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, took office. The Radcliffe Line became infamous for the chaos and suffering it caused. The hurried and sometimes arbitrary nature of the boundary demarcation led to significant communal violence and mass migrations. Millions of people were displaced, and there were extensive riots and brutal clashes along the newly drawn borders. Estimates suggest that up to 1 million people may have died and 10-15 million were displaced. "Perhaps the most obvious sign of the partition of India in 1947 was the massive violence that accompanied, or as I would argue, constituted it" (Pandey 2001, p.189).

### **WOMEN IN PARTITION VIOLENCE**

Women bore the brunt of the horrific and widespread violence that left an indelible mark on the subcontinent's history. Communal tensions erupted into brutal violence, disproportionately affecting women. Estimates suggest that between 75,000 and 100,000 women were abducted, raped, and subjected to violence across both newly created nations. In Punjab and Bengal, regions heavily impacted by the partition, women were often kidnapped by communal mobs, forced into sexual slavery, or coerced into conversion and marriage. The violence was not only physical but also deeply psychological, with many women enduring immense trauma and stigma. In response to the atrocities, both Indian and Pakistani governments eventually undertook large-scale operations to rescue and rehabilitate abducted women, though these efforts were often inadequate and marred by bureaucratic challenges. The harrowing experiences of women during the Partition highlight the gendered dimensions of communal violence and remain a bleak chapter in the history of the subcontinent.

"The scale and intensity of the violence in Punjab continue to horrify us even today, virtually paralyzing any effort to fully comprehend its meaning." (Menon and Bhasin 1998, p.38). Urvashi Butalia aptly writes, "It is now widely known that sexual violence happened on a mass scale during partition and nearly a hundred thousand women were believed to have abducted, raped, sometimes sold in the prostitution, sometimes forcibly married" (Butalia 1998, p. xvii). Chandni Saxena writes, "Partition brought different meanings for men and women. It was indeed tough, very tough for men, but it was barbaric for women. It was a one-time death and thus, freedom from suffering for men, but it was a living continuous hell for women" (Saxena 2014, p.1253). Ayesha Jalal says, "The men of all three religions delighted in their momentary sense of power over a vulnerable woman" (Jalal 1998, p. 2185). Butalia describes the forms that this violence took for women – "There are accounts of innumerable rapes, of women being stripped naked and paraded down streets, of their breasts being cut off, of their bodies being carved with the religious symbols of the other community" (Butalia 1993, p.37). Anis Kidwai recalls, "The volunteers told

me of many, many women who had ‘Pakistan Zindabad’ tattooed on their foreheads and the names of numerous rapists cut into their arms and breasts [...] Hundreds of Muslim girls were also brought to me, on whose arms hoodlums had tattooed their names and even the date of their crimes” (Kidwai 2011, p.216). Kamla Patel informs, “As soon as the task of recovering Muslim women began, ‘Om’ or other Hindu mantras were tattooed on the bodies of these women. Even the district and taluka Congress workers did not hesitate to issue false certificates to prove that these women were truly Hindus!” (Patel 2012, p.36).

## RECOVERY OPERATION

The Partition of India resulted in the largest displacement of people in human history, accompanied by frenzied violence, murder, rape loot, and arson, with women being the chief sufferers. Butalia offers some statistics for the justification of setting up the Central Recovery Operation. She writes, “the number of Hindu and Sikh women abducted in Pakistan was roughly 33,000 – although some estimates put this figure at 50,000 – (this did not include women from Kashmir and it was felt that if these were added the figure could well have reached 50,000). The list received from Pakistan showed the figure of Muslim women abducted in India to be around 21,000. Whether or not these lists were accurate, they did serve to point to the size of the problem” (Butalia 2019, p. 93).

The scale of reports of missing women during the displacement in the Partition of India forced the governments to set up a United Council for Relief and Welfare. In September 1947, the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan met in Lahore and decided to start a program for recovering abducted women from both sides. On December 6, 1947, an Inter-Dominion Treaty was signed for this purpose and the program was called Central Recovery Operation. In 1949 the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act was also passed for the same. Under this Act, any conversions by persons abducted after March 1947 were not recognized and all such persons had to be restored to their respective dominions. The Act stated that the wishes of the persons concerned are irrelevant and consequently no statements of such persons should be recorded before Magistrate. This operation went on for 9 years after the partition.

## KAMLA PATEL

Kamla Patel was born in Gujarat in 1912. Her father was one of the people chosen by Gandhiji for his *Salt Satyagrah*. She was also a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and spent her early years in Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad. In 1944 she joined the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust in Bombay. She was widowed at nineteen and decided to become a social worker. She was mentored by Mridula Sarabhai who was the Chief All India Organizer of the Recovery and Rehabilitation Programme. As Mridula Sarabhai's representative, Kamla was stationed at the Gangaram Hospital in Lahore. Patel went on to work with Mridula Sarabhai, Rameshwari Nehru, Sucheta Kriplani and others for the recovery and rehabilitation of abducted women and children during and after the Partition. As the Indian representative, Kamla Patel stayed in Lahore for two years and in Karachi for a couple of months. She also worked in Amritsar for refugees and abducted women's rehabilitation. “When I was at Lahore, and later at Amritsar, I was busy for 14 to 16 hours every day, and I used to be surrounded by all kinds of people throughout the day” (Patel 2012, p.196). Further, she says, “I was going to be put up at the house of the officer in charge of the recovery of women in Kashmir with the rank of an Under Secretary of the Government of India” (p.200). These myriad experiences are the basis of her memoir that she penned down 27 years after her experiences, the time frame she needed to be objective and see “incidents *in their proper perspective and in a proper frame of mind*” (Patel xiii). Earlier she expresses her disinclination to write about her experiences as the

memory of the horrific ordeals of these recovered women made her “agitated and mentally uneasy” (Patel xiii). Her memoir was originally written in Gujarati as *Mool Sotan Ukhdele* (1977) and later translated into English by Uma Randeria - *Torn from the Roots: a Partition Memoir* (2006).

In the Preface to her memoir, Kamla Patel writes- “*I cannot thank God enough for giving me this opportunity of serving this righteous and noble cause of recovering lost women and sending them back to their own families. In life, what more happiness can there be than having been able to participate in a worthy cause.*” (Preface xxv) This gives us an insight into the motivation for the work of recovery. However, this high ideal was often confronted with insurmountable moral dilemmas that reflected the problem of a poorly imagined law. The Recovery Laws did not consider the wishes of the women that were to be recovered. The architect of the Bill on the Recovery of Women, Gopaldaswamy Ayyengar in Parliament argued: “Women or abducted persons are rescued from surroundings which prima facie *do not give them the liberty to make a free choice as regards their own lives...* The idea is that in the environment that she is in at that moment, *she is not a free agent, she has not got the liberty of mind* to say whether she wants to leave that environment and go back to her original environment or whether she should stay here.” (My emphasis Butalia 1998, p.185)

Thus, people like Kamla Patel and Anis Kidwai were often forced to personally mediate and negotiate the recovery process. Their own biases and religious and ideological positions affected the decisions they made. There are many instances in the text where she sees Pakistan as an “enemy country”, (Patel, p.122) or feels threatened walking in a street in Lahore in a “khadi saree” (p.126) or calls a Pakistani sub-inspector a “beast” (p.143). However, their contribution considering the enormity of the task they faced cannot be overemphasised.

Kamla Patel came out strongly in support of not separating mothers from their children in the recovery process. She said even imagining a “child being forcibly snatched from its weeping mother had taken hold of my emotions and my capacity to judge impartially had been benumbed” (Patel 2012, p.145). She even threatened to leave her job if Hindu mothers were forced to leave their children behind. Kamla Patel provides the various arrangements made for children who were brought back but left behind by women in camps. She said that even now she could hear the weeping and lamentation of women as they left the children behind. She records her satisfaction that the state agreed to be a guardian to the children and that Sarabhai set up a special department in Kamla Nehru Hospital in Allahabad, that Indian National Airways flew these children from Amritsar to Allahabad (p.147). At the same time, she is also honest enough to retrospectively note that all the “promises and assurances” made to the mothers about the welfare of the children turned out to be false because the social workers never saw these children again (p.147). While the newly formed nation-states were eager to recover ‘their’ women, the children posed a different problem. “The citizenship of the children born to the abducted women remained a contentious issue. What could be the citizenship of children born to Muslim mothers and Hindu fathers or those begotten by Hindu mothers and Muslim fathers? Would the citizenship devolve through the mothers or the fathers, through the nationality or religion? (Mehra 2014, p.1247).

Kamlaben Patel in her memoir reinforces her idea that woman who commits suicide is to be seen as someone heroic. Yet it does not preclude genuine sympathy for the lost lives. On her visit to Miyanwali district to make a camp there, Patel is shown a well full of dead bodies of women “who had jumped in to save their honour”. The stench of the well had forced most people to evacuate the area. “Innumerable women who were abducted during the riots were repeatedly sold; while some were even offered as gifts to friends and relations! Some women happened to settle down after changing hands four or five times,

while some others were just thrown out the streets [...] Having heard the stories from these women of the inhuman or rather beastly acts to which they were subjected, we lost our appetites and even our sleep” (Patel p.19).

## CONCLUSION

Partition historiography for a long time was limited to ‘high politics.’ Historians had focused on the causes and negotiations that led to the Partition. It was left to literature to first begin to address the violence and trauma that Partition entailed for the millions of affected people. The intervention of feminist historiography altered much of this. Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin’s *Borders and Boundaries* (1998) are seminal texts that looked at expanding the historical archive to include women’s voices for their experience of the Partition. Apart from oral testimonies of survivors, the voices of women like Kamla Patel and Anis Kidwai, who were working on the ground for the recovery operations, are also an invaluable addition to the expanding archive.

Kamla Patel writes honestly about the many instances where women were forced to relocate against their wishes as social workers like her were instructed by the government to “consider the good of humanity at large and not give importance to individual feelings” (Patel p.41). Kamla Patel’s efforts were crucial in organizing shelters, providing medical aid, and offering psychological support to the survivors. She also worked on legal frameworks for the recovery of abducted women and their reintegration into society. Patel’s work is often praised for its empathy and dedication; she sought to restore dignity and provide practical support amidst the chaos. The scale of the crisis was enormous, and resources were insufficient to meet the overwhelming need. Many women did not receive timely assistance, and there were challenges in coordinating between different organizations and governments. Patel’s initiatives, while impactful, were constrained by the socio-political realities and insufficient support from both the Indian and Pakistani governments, which often failed to prioritize the recovery of women effectively.

Uma Randeria, the translator of the original memoir *Mool Sotan Ukhdelan* sheds light on Kamla Patel’s self-reflexivity and misgivings regarding the recovery process in the ‘Translator’s Note’. She writes, “In an introspective mood, Kamlaben asked herself the question whether what she did was really all that ‘noble’. At times, she felt that the women rescued from both sides of the border were looked upon as ‘objects’ rather than human beings. No one had time to find out in all cases, the wishes of each woman, whether she was really happy where she was, or wished to be reunited with her own family”. (Patel 2012, p.ix)

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