

REVIEWS

Beyond Partition: Gender, Violence and Representation in Postcolonial India. By Deepti Misri. (University of Illinois Press, 2014, 241 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-09681-5).

The way in which India after Partition has come to be thought of and discussed in Western academic circles has been largely dependent on three concepts: its record of communal violence, the caste system and the dismal condition of women. Gender Studies has been an important lens through which Indian postcolonial cultural production may be analysed, mainly due to the influence of theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, and it is precisely this idea of gender that Deepti Misri uses as an encompassing element of analysis. This book is inscribed into a wider effort to understand how Partition and other landmarks in Indian history have been lived by women and other vulnerable gendered communities, an effort that is seen in the proliferation of anthologies of essays and stories on the topic. The central thesis of this book, then, revolves precisely around the idea of India and how gender and violence (in all their different forms) have been crucial in the development of the nation both before and after Partition, successfully examining how different acts of violence that have been understood from the historical point of view actually interplay with some forms of gender ideology.

Misri's use of an interdisciplinary approach, including source material from literature, film, photography and even forms of public protest in her analysis, provides the reader with a more complete understanding of the way in which gender and violence interact with each other in India, as well as the role of history/stories and state power in this. Then, although this book tackles issues that seem to be familiar in

Postcolonial Studies, the way it relates gendered violence to other forms of conflict - ie. communal violence, the Naxalite guerrillas, the ongoing conflict in Kashmir - distinguish it from other studies in this field, albeit in a reader-friendly manner.

This study is insightful and original in its exploration of men and their vulnerability to gendered violence through its emphasis on the body. This is particularly evident in the first and fifth chapters, where the author analyses the representation of the vulnerability of male bodies in times of conflict, using literature (Manto's *Black Marginalia*) and the "spectacle" of public mourning in Kashmir carried out by the Association of Parents of Disappeared People. In both cases, Misri argues that in a context of conflict, individual bodies are perceived as communal bodies, and that this "transformation" has gendered connotations. Then, a woman's body, in her chastity bears the honour of a community, and a male body is a marker of religion due to its physical appearance (for example, long hair and turbans in Sikh men). Therefore, an attack on a female or male body is an attack on the honour or the beliefs of a community, showing this how the long-term consequences of Partition violence might come to be seen as gendered, and this of course includes men.

In the case of the APDP protests in Kashmir, examined in chapter five, Misri muses on the gendered ideology that seems to be at work in this type of public mourning. She focuses on the representation in the media of the images of wailing women, embodying the loss of their sons, and bases her analysis of this phenomenon on the idea that the symbol of these protests is the image of the *mater dolorosa*, the helpless woman left behind after the disappearance of her male relatives, and on the fact that male grievers are re-



peatedly ignored by the press, although they are also the parents of the missing men. However, the question of how the gendered organization already present in these protests interacts with the male gaze of the camera is something that would deserve further analysis in future research, taking into account the book's emphasis on representation.

Another element of Misri's analysis that is interesting for the study of the consequences of Partition is her interest in stories (as opposed to history) and their gendered implications. Misri's application of the idea of "patriarchal remembering" in chapter two may have been used in a wide range of situations, but she convincingly continued to elaborate on the idea that bodies have a communal and gendered significance in India and relates the mechanisms through which narrations of Partition stories have been mainly male-dominated to wider concepts such as women's historical silence and the discourse of shame. Then, using Krishna Mehta's novel *Kashmir 1947* as an example she points out how the conception of the female body as the bearer of family and community honour has created an Indian cultural imagery of "women martyrs" that prefer death over being raped by members of another community, not because of the shame imposed on them, but on their male relatives. This cultural imagery has placed an aura of "willingness" over the tellings of such violence in Partition stories, which is further explained when taking into account that the power of storytelling has been placed in the hands of men.

Postcolonial feminist studies have thoroughly studied women in relation to their struggles as doubly colonized subjects, but it is only recently that the need to study and represent

them as strong and resistant individuals has been acknowledged. This book, then, not only explores the consequences of violence against women, but also concentrates on alternative, dissident narrations in which women take control. An example of this could be the analysis of how the afore mentioned discourse of shame can be appropriated and turned into one of empowerment and resistance, as seen in the short story "Draupadi", included in chapter five, and the exploration of "naked protests", where the use of nudity as a form of protest is explained. These two instances demonstrate how this form of breaking femininity, modesty rules and gender performativity (in Judith Butler's words) can deconstruct the violence caused by the gender and caste-based ideology of the state.

Beyond Partition will offer little insight to those interested in studying the representation of the third gender (the *hijras*) or homosexuality in India, as both issues have been left out of the picture; it will, however, be welcomed by researchers seeking to find new ways of approaching the problematic representation of Indian women and disrupt the ever-present tendency of seeing them as victims.

In conclusion, *Beyond Partition* makes a good addition to the wider discussion of representation, postcolonialism, feminism and violence in India. These concepts are neatly weaved together, demonstrating how gender violence, caste violence and state power are better understood in a postcolonial context when they are grouped together.

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