

# The state and the subaltern

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Bureaucratic violence and agency in Partition  
cinema

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# The state and the subaltern : Bureaucratic violence and agency in Partition cinema

The cataclysmic events of 1947 saw the creation of two independent sovereign states, India and Pakistan, and with it began the one of the largest mass migrations in human history. Yet entwined with the violence of migration was another kind of aggression: “the bureaucratic violence of drawing political boundaries and nationalising identities that became, in some lives, interminable.”<sup>1</sup> However, women, even if rendered subaltern<sup>2</sup> by this process that created nationalities and set boundaries on citizenship, exhibited agency<sup>3</sup>.

This paper aims to explore how women’s agency and their subjection to bureaucratic violence are represented in films on Partition, and how the latter is negotiated and/or resisted in those films by women whose mobility, identity, and ideas of belonging were affected in this drawing of boundaries<sup>4</sup> and creation of gendered, ethnicised citizenship<sup>5</sup>. These stories can also act as counter-memory to histories that depict 1947 as a moment of rupture when the subcontinent was divided into two distinct states that emerged with their borders fully formed<sup>6</sup>.

The paper looks at two films. In Srijit Mukherji’s *Begum Jaan* (2017), a brothel is situated at a place through which a border, part of the Radcliffe Line, has to be erected by state

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<sup>1</sup> Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Kavita Daiya, *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender and National Culture in Postcolonial India* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008), 134.

<sup>3</sup> See Urvashi Butalia, “Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency during Partition,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 17 (Apr. 24, 1993), 12–24.

<sup>4</sup> As Clive Barnett argues, the “representation of exclusion and expulsion that constitutes and reconstitutes boundaries, but which in turn also renders all boundaries liable to deformation.” Clive Barnett, “Impure and Worldly Geography: The Africanist Discourse of the Royal Geographical Society 1831–73,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 23 (1998), 248.

<sup>5</sup> Daiya, “Train to Pakistan 2007,” in *Violent Belongings*, 1–30.

<sup>6</sup> Zamindar, *The Long Partition*, 4.

officials. Despite several warnings, Begum Jaan, the Muslim woman who owns the mansion and takes care of the prostitutes, refuses to evacuate the mansion and eventually leads a group of women against the male officials in physical combat. The other movie, Shyam Benegal's *Mammo* (1994), narrates a post-1947 partition experience. Mammo is Mehmooda's nickname, a Muslim woman who migrates from Panipat to Lahore in 1947 and becomes a Pakistani. She returns to her sister's house in Bombay, India, after her husband passes away, but her efforts to ensure her stay is permanent — by getting a visa extension or having her case misplaced — are unsuccessful. She is returned forcefully to Pakistan but returns to India with another idea that does the trick: a death certificate that renders her untraceable — a “genie in a lamp” (*chiraagh ka jinn*).

The paper is divided into two parts – one that explores how bureaucratic violence is imagined in these films, while the second will problematise the resistance and enactment of agency presented in them. Partition violence in different forms is evoked in both films, but bureaucratic violence will be stressed upon for the purposes of this paper. The paper argues that the agency of women in these films is limited to certain notions of escaping bureaucratic violence which is not only state violence but also, very specifically, violence by men.

### **Bureaucratic violence**

In *Begum Jaan*, the role of bureaucratic violence is explicit: a border must be drawn through Begum Jaan's brothel, as mandated by the Boundary Commission. What is relevant to this paper is the way this drawing of borders is depicted. Two men, Srivastav from the Indian National Congress and Ilias from the Muslim League, are in-charge of the process. They use a small hill as a vantage point and with binoculars look down at the brothel, which is situated on a vast expanse of empty land. They are presented as “agents of knowledge”<sup>7</sup> who use the colonial gaze and a panoptic view to regulate space. In this case, it is evident that

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<sup>7</sup> Barnett, “Impure and Worldly Geography,” 247.

their gaze is that of the masculine state,<sup>8</sup> the two officials representing the states of Pakistan and India through their attire and their ethnicised names. Only half of their faces feature in the frame when they are alone to converse with each other, showing the two nascent states as halves of a whole.

Once Begum Jaan has been given an eviction notice, the border is materially established. This visual depiction is significant because the process of establishing boundaries has been already established as part of the definition of bureaucratic violence. An important scene takes place halfway through the movie — a Raja, the brothel's patron, is shown to have arrived for a night. He has asked for a virgin, who he knows is present at the brothel, despite Begum Jaan's protests that the girl is new. Shabnam is shown to be pulled across the courtyard of the mansion as she resists being prepared for the man's sexual pleasures. The scene then simultaneously shows a roll of barbed wires being pulled across barren land. As kohl is being applied to Shabnam's eyes, land too is being demarcated by white chalk. As she is being dressed, wooden poles are being cut from trees and nails are hammered through them.

The border is also shown as being located on maps through cartographic instruments representative of colonial imaginings of spaces.<sup>9</sup> Placed on the map that the Congress official uses in this sequence are also a magnifying glass and a ruler that divides India and Pakistan; using a marker, he draws a boundary near a region marked Lahore. The subjugation of land to physical demarcation and colonial cartographic practices is presented as a girl being subjected to a man's sexual pleasures against her will. This presents the view that the land is

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<sup>8</sup> Veena Das, "The Figure of the Abducted Woman," in *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007). Here, Das argues that "public anxieties around sexuality and purity" created the basis on which "the figure of the violated woman became an important mobilising point for reinstating the nation as a "pure" and masculine space."

<sup>9</sup>Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

not merely earth, but untouched and pure; it is conflated with a woman to represent the violence of bureaucratic practices and techniques of scientific geography and cartography.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 1: Three scenes that appear together in *Begum Jaan*: Land conflated with a woman's body as bureaucratic agents use the science of cartography to draw a border.

<sup>10</sup>Sumathi Ramaswamy, "Maps, Mother/Goddesses and Martyrdom in Modern India," in *Empires of Vision* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 423.

In the case of *Mammo*, the film symbolically presents the dispossession that a border brings about. It does this specifically through a train on which Mammo is sent away, even as her sister's fourteen-year-old grandson, Riyaz finds her and tries to stop her from being sent away. While the train is representative of her displacement, there is another significant visual cue —she is continuously shown to be burqa-clad whenever she ventures outside her sister's house. However, when police officers descend on her sister's place because Mammo has overstayed her visa, they pull the latter outside without giving her a chance to put on her



*Figure 2: The depiction of Mammo's forced departure from India.*

burqa. Her sister frantically takes it off a hook on the wall and tries to hand it to her, even running after her with the burqa as Mammo is being taken away to be deported to Pakistan.

Previously, the burqa is shown to be a strong marker of Mammo as a resolute woman who can navigate any kind of space by covering herself with it. For instance, she dons it before going to the police office to register herself, to a slum where her maid lives and even to a pub there to berate the maid's husband for domestic abuse. Riyaz and his best friend wear her burqas to get into a cinema without being questioned. The burqa thus becomes a mark of respectability that the male state removes when it acts against her will to send her to Pakistan, leaving her bare and vulnerable.

Therefore, the two films conflate the “the sacredness of the nation with the sacredness of Woman, making women both an object of protection and target of violence — both physical and discursive — in the struggle for independence.”<sup>11</sup> More than conflating nation with woman, the female body also becomes “a paradigmatic site of colonial power/knowledge”<sup>12</sup> in such films when ideas about the nation and body politic are at the centre. This section has not questioned why the female body becomes the paradigmatic site - it shows *how* it becomes such a site in two films and how women are presented as being *subjected* to violence. When the same Muslim women are shown as *agents* against the state, their agency is presented differently, as the next section will explore.

### **Resistance and agency**

It is difficult to ascertain the nature of women's agency when they act against violence. Urvashi Butalia explains;

...as explorations of the experiences of women during Partition show, it is difficult to arrive at general conclusions about women, history and their agential capacity.

Women have often played out multiple and overlapping identities. An understanding

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<sup>11</sup> Jill Didur, *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Janet Price and Margrit Shildwick, “Mapping the Colonial Body: Sexual Economies and the State in Colonial India,” in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 389.

of agency also needs to take into account notions of the moral order which is sought to be preserved when women act, as well as the mediation of the family, community, class.<sup>13</sup>

This paper will now see how the women in the two films are presented when they resist against the nation-making project of the two states of India and Pakistan, as well as ask questions about what other forms of resistance can be inhabited.

The spaces that the women inhabit in both films speak of the way resistance is visually represented. In *Begum Jaan*, resistance against borders is presented as sexual transgression by construing a lone brothel on no-man's land as unwanted and irrational. It is criticised by men in the first half of the film who characterise it as filth ("*gandagi*") and as a source of diseases ("*gandi gandi beemariyan phelati hain*"). The mansion is also relegated to a place outside city limits. This is also a remnant of colonial appropriation of space – for instance, Chattopadhyay explains that the Contagious Disease Transgression Act of 1868 was imposed in Calcutta to control the visibility of prostitutes in the city.<sup>14</sup> In *Begum Jaan*, the women who resist against a new nation's use of governmentality by rebelling against a border, and against the very idea of 'belonging' to a state, are demeaned by a focus on their sexuality as transgressive.

In *Mammo*, Mehmooda's resistance also makes her a woman who is ready to let go of feminine behaviour. Tellingly, she does not have any children or dependents to take care of.<sup>15</sup> Shown as free-spirited and talkative, she asks Riyaz towards the middle of the film to light a cigarette for her as she reminisces stealing them from her father. This visually demarcates her as different from her sister, who unlike her, is not displaced in a country that she calls home.

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<sup>13</sup> Butalia, "Community, State and Gender," 12.

<sup>14</sup> Swati Chattopadhyay, "Death in Public," in *Representing Calcutta* (London: Routledge, 2005), 256.

<sup>15</sup> Das explains that within the masculine state, a woman's allegiance to it is proved by her role as a mother who has borne legitimate children. Das, *Life and Words*, 35–36.



The space her sister inhabits is most often the kitchen, making food while complaining that no one helps her. Hence, Mammo does not exhibit the habits that her sister does; in failing to be the ideal homemaker she is represented as a woman who stands against the ethnicised citizenship imposed on her and who claims her identity as an Indian unflinchingly in opposition to the masculine state.

This has parallels to the way morality was delineated even in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Bishabriksha*<sup>16</sup>. There, morality was centred in carefully delineated spaces such as inside the "normative space of home"<sup>17</sup> and here, Benegal reproduces similar ideas in his film about women who conform and refuse to conform to state-sanctioned identity. Mammo is offered sanctuary within India only by two spaces – her sister's home and religious sites. When she is criticised by her sister and by Riyaz as being dominant and intrusive, she leaves her sister's home, offended at being disowned by being called a guest (*mehman*). They look for her at various *dargahs* as a song in the background questions where one's homeland lies (*na jaane kaun si mitti watn ki mitti thhi*) only to find her eventually at Haji Ali Dargah. This shows that Mammo is not entirely outside the norms that dictate feminine behaviour – her mobility as a woman remains restricted in the public sphere where she must venture with Riyaz or, if she wishes to be alone, in a *dargah*.<sup>18</sup> Even in the *dargah*, she is not creating an alternate lifeworld – rather, she confines herself to a corner.

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<sup>16</sup> An analysis of this novel is offered in Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta*.

<sup>17</sup> Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta*, 241.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 253. It is perhaps relevant to mention how Chattopadhyay's analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's *Srir Patra* shows that even his literary imagination confined women who could not find a sanctuary within the home to spiritual devotion (Vaishnav *bhakti*).



Figure 3: Mammo's sister is shown mostly as inhabiting the space of the kitchen.



Figure 4: Mammo, on the other hand, is shown as partaking in behaviour in her sister's home that is prohibited even for Riyaz.



Figure 3: The Haji Ali Dargah is shown as offering sanctuary to Mammo.



In *Begum Jaan*, a certain kind of resistance is exhibited by the daughter of a prostitute, Laadli. In the prelude, the film begins with a scene (present-day India) where molesters try to grab a woman who is running away to escape from them. The men are stopped by an old lady (an aged Laadli) who takes off her clothes, and they run away in revulsion. Towards the end of the film, we are shown that in 1947, while Laadli was running away with her mother and another woman from the brothel during the combat, they were intercepted by a police inspector who removed his pants as other policemen looked on. Laadli, here too, had saved them by baring her body.

This act by a girl has “epistemic stakes”<sup>19</sup> – it is not only a form of protest but also a challenge to the police inspector whose masculinity resides in state power. It is to say that his “administrative masculinity”<sup>20</sup> will be in shambles if he attempts to surpass her — a small girl. In the prelude, the molesters are shown in the visual frame with the Indian flag in the background, the music that plays in his scene heralds her act as heroic — as if she has restored honour to the woman. Hence, this act of disobedience to “shame-ridden femininity”<sup>21</sup> marks her as a saviour. One notes however, that this can be problematic because honour, yet again, is being derived from a woman’s body - when the Indian flag flutters proudly in the background it visually announces that Laadli has saved the honour of the country.



Figure 4: The molesters run away. Laadli's bare legs are shown along with the Indian flag in the same frame.

Apart from showing the women’s choice to resist agents of the state and state-ordained boundaries and citizenship, both films depict death as the final decision taken up by the women. In *Begum Jaan*, it is literal death, whereas in *Mammo*, the protagonist declares herself dead on paper to become stateless and evade the imposition of bureaucratic violence— whether state-ordained identity or the temporary nature of a visa. She speaks directly to the camera, and hence the viewer, when she declares that she won’t be made to

<sup>19</sup> Deepti Misri, “Are You a Man?” in *Beyond Partition: Gender, Violence and Representation in Postcolonial India* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 132.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

cross the border with handcuffs. The death certificate marks her agential capacity as limited — while it criticises the technology of citizenship and visas, it is ultimately an act of symbolic suicide that can free her from the clutches of this kind of violence. To become ‘stateless’, Mammo has to produce a document declaring herself dead. The idea of statelessness is also evident when Begum Jaan claims repeatedly in the film that the brothel is her country (*mera watn*) where the women’s bodies are their own, and where their will and their laws function (*yahan jism hamara, marzi hamari aur qanoon bhi hamara hee chalta hai*).



Figure 5: Mammo faces the audience while declaring that “no man born of a woman” (*koi mai ka laal*) will be able to force her to cross the border.

Hence, Mammo has to use a death certificate to escape the clutches of citizenship since she cannot invoke the state’s sympathy for her argument that she is simply returning to India. For Begum Jaan, the claim that the brothel is their home and country is also not enough. They eventually commit suicide – an act painted as heroic in the film. Butalia in her investigations into the violence women experienced during Partition<sup>22</sup> encountered an incident: in a village, Thoa Khalsa, around ninety women had thrown themselves into a well in order to preserve the purity of their religion for they would be forced to convert otherwise. While analysing

<sup>22</sup> Butalia, “Community, State and Gender,” 14-15.

this act, Butalia asks pertinent questions –if they committed suicide to protect the honour of the community, does it make it an act of pure agency? She concludes that the women are simultaneously agents and victims. In the analyses here, the same questions can be raised. Why is it that an exit from this world marks the final act of securing freedom for women? Can they not create alternate lifeworlds within this world?

In *Begum Jaan*, four women along with the protagonist act similarly to the women of Thao Khalsa – they retreat into the burning mansion, choosing to die. They gather with an old lady, Amma, who lives with them, and Begum Jaan asks her to narrate the tale of Padmavati. Amma then recounts that she jumped into a fire along with 12,000 women instead of surrendering to the enemy. Their act is then hailed to be heroic like Padmavati's. It is pertinent to mention that Begum Jaan appears as a female warrior throughout the film – whenever Amma narrates any tale to Laadli, there is a sequence showing Begum Jaan as that story's hero. For instance, the film introduces her through Amma's narration of the story of Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi — in her imagination, the Rani is Begum Jaan fighting against colonisers.



*Figure 6: Begum Jaan and other women commit suicide at the end of the film.*

The state too is symbolically shown to be weakened by the martyrdom of the women – the Muslim League official (Ilias) shoots himself, the Congress official (Srivastav) becomes an alcoholic, and the police officer is shown as a desolate wanderer as he surveys the ruins of the

mansion. While the act of suicide presents itself as heroism that saved them from the hands of the masculine state, it yet again raises questions of the agential capacity of the women. For instance, since surrender would mean that men would inflict further violence, was it a decision that they were compelled to take?



Figure 7: Shyam Singh as a wanderer, looking at the place where the mansion was.

### Subjectivity and spectacle

This paper is partly an attempt to explore how bureaucratic violence against women, both during and after 1947, has been represented in film. It is also an analysis of the representation of agency in such films. This is not to undermine the trauma of physical violence but to look at how another kind of violence and resistance to it is portrayed. The analyses of two films here — *Begum Jaan* and *Mammo* — have explored that the drawing of boundaries and imposition of citizenship can configure as a violation of honour and sanctity. Since *Begum Jaan* and *Mehmooda* challenge those boundaries and such imposition by a masculine state, these films seem to provide counter-narratives. Yet, this is only on the surface because one can raise questions about female subjectivity<sup>23</sup> - does the resistance of these women show them as subjects? It only seems to be limited to spectacle – on the other side of ‘heroic resistance’ is the conflation of woman with nation, with the female body as the primary site for imaginings of state power.

<sup>23</sup> See Natali Natarjan, “Women, Nation and Narration in *Midnight’s Children*,” in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 399-410.

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