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FEMINIST INTERRUPTIONS
The Silence of East Bengal in the Story of Partition

Shelley Feldman

Using a feminist episteme I examine the exclusion of the East Bengal/East Pakistan experience in constructions of contemporary narratives of Partition. Including the double colonialism of East Bengal, its particular location in the ethnic and religious hierarchies of the region, and the simultaneity of separation and violence as well as freedom and social mobility challenges the emergent meta-narrative of violence by contributing a contradictory interpretation of the Partition experience. This more complicated, contradictory interpretation extends the important rethinking that accompanies the critique of elitist, state-centred histories of the period and the inclusion of women’s voices in Partition analyses. Particular attention is given to how extant circumstances in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh contribute to the erasure of the East Bengal voice from contemporary debates.

We cannot find an historically nuanced answer to (any) question unless we think of the field of discourse as one of contention, peopled by several subjects, several consciousnesses.

Chatterjee 1993: 137

The varied idioms – political, social, testimonial, literary, documentary – used for uncovering, accessing, and representing the past suggest as much about the myriad expressions, interests and points of view that shape current debates on the 1947 Partition as they do about the diverse methodological approaches
1. I employ Das's (1996a: 6) understanding of Partition which juxtaposed in itself a series of heterogeneous moments that together made up the larger political event called Partition.

2. Here I draw on the insight of Appadurai (1996): The production of locality, as a dimension of social life, as a structure of feeling and in its material expression in lived co-presence is a social practice and as such can be associated with a physical environment. As Balibar similarly suggests, national formations, the imaginary which inscribes itself in the real in this way is that of the people. It is that of a community which recognizes itself in advance in the institution of the state (and which) inscribes its political struggles within the horizon of that state (or place) (Balibar 1991: 93). While Appadurai stresses the current reorganization of place, a recrudescence of the modern nation state, it is none the less clear that these new transnational spaces represent social processes of identification and deployed to explore this period in subcontinental history. Over the past fifteen years, debates, particularly about gender, violence and memory, have generated important representations of Partition, focused predominantly on explaining the relationship between nationalism and communalism (Pandey 1990, 1992, 1996; Das 1992, 1996a; Menon and Bhasin 1993, 1996, 1998; Butalia 1993, 1998), and on interpreting the correspondence or intersections of gender and nation (Chatterjee 1989, 1993; Sangari and Vaid 1989). Whether debate focuses on the period leading up to the Partition and its immediate aftermath, the experiences of the division for those displaced by establishing borders between East Pakistan and India, or on the thousands of women separated from their kin, raped, drawn into suicide or even murdered by family members to maintain family honour, what is striking is the absence of the voices of East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh from these discussions. I invoke the spatial imaginary to suggest neither a territorial determinism nor an homogenization of perspective associated with place. Rather, I want to acknowledge that place, territory, and processes of reterritorialization are representations of particular social histories and practices that are constituted by culturally marked populations. Striking, as well, are the connections between resurgent interest in Partition and contemporary Indian politics, and an increased appreciation for the salience of historically specific interpretations of all experiences and social processes.

I contend that contemporary interpretations of 1947 from the point of view of East Bengal(is) contribute to analyses of the experiences of Partition by examining what some might consider a double colonialism, a particular location in the ethnic/religious hierarchies of the region, and a bloody struggle for independence twenty-five years later. Thus, a perspective from East Bengal(is), or one that includes East Bengal as a particular site, adds to Partition analyses an appreciation of the contradictions posed by the events of 1947 and its aftermath. In contrast to nationalist interpretations, such a perspective also interprets Partition as a contestatory process of state formation, an opportunity to examine loss and dismemberment, while simultaneously appreciating that for some Muslim Bengalis, Partition was also a way to emerge from Hindu domination and to experience cultural autonomy as a Muslim and as a Bengali (Ahmed 1988; Anisuzzaman 1993). As well, a view from East Bengal incorporates the meanings and consequences of a less violent and slower process of migration and a shared, even if contradictory, linguistic and literary tradition with West Bengal (Anisuzzaman 1993). In this brief essay, I seek to extend the scope of current debates by arguing that understanding representations of the past requires engaging contemporary political interests, including constructions of communalism, difference, and critiques of the national narrative using feminist and subaltern historiography as alternative modes of interpretation. My purpose is primarily a conceptual one, to acknowledge the exclusion and silence of the East Bengali voice in order to suggest how it has occurred and identify the epistemic
3 I am not arguing for a relativism which requires all voices to be heard, although surely it is important to recognize the diverse constituents who are excluded from view in state and elite representations of the Partition. Instead, I suggest that the absence of the East Bengal voice, as a separate state in the present, adds a dimension to the state-making project of the Partition which may differ from the contributions of the voices and perspectives of such constituencies as ethnic groups or regional histories and experiences.
4 I share with Alonso (1994: 380) the view that the state is a historically constructed and contested exercise in legitimation and moral regulation. This focus draws attention to the building of a national character and national identity as well as the process of individualizing social actors who are differentiated along the axes of class, occupation, gender, age, ethnicity and locality.

5 The essay by Aijaz Ahmad, 'In the Mirror of Urdu: Recompositions of foundations of the contemporary critique of the nationalist narrative. Until this exclusion of and silence from East Bengal is fully recognized for what it portends for the construction of the national narrative, whether of India, Pakistan or Bangladesh, it will be impossible to adequately recast the contemporary discourse on Partition. By exclusion I refer to the absence of the experiences of East Bengal in constructing the Indian and Pakistani narrative of Partition; by silence I mean the limited attention Bengalis and Bangladeshis pay to the Partition experience in building a nationalist consciousness and interpreting the struggle for Independence.

Drawing on feminist insights which clarify the salience of the particular, the emasculated other, and the silencing that attend this construction, I will explore how we might extend the critical contributions of recent debates on gender, nationalism and communalism (cf. Sarkar and Butalia 1996; Sangari and Vaid 1989; Menon and Bhasin 1998; Das 1992, 1996a, 1996b). Of special concern are the extraordinary contributions of Butalia (1993, 1997, 1998), Menon (1998) and Menon and Bhasin (1993, 1996, 1998) who disentangle the many experiences of Partition for women and their kin who lived through the various events that combine to construct the dramatic changes of the period surrounding 1947.

My premise is that East Bengal serves as a metaphor for a place that, like women, is constructed as other, invisible, different, and silenced in the real politics of the time. As in discussions of women and nationalism, histories (and truths) of the particular are documented and conveyed as if they account for the myriad experiences that constitute social events. A meta-narrative which locates the experiences of East Bengal outside the discursive boundary, whether constructed about nationalism or about Partition, constitutes the framework for efforts to forge a hegemonic reference for all that lies within its bounds. This framework organizes how we think about social processes, sets the physical and social parameters of the exchange, offers an explanation for any oppositional interpretation, and organizes movements of challenge. Such an authorization is asserted, however differently, in the Indian as well as in the Pakistani Partition literature by the erasure, or at best limited presence, of the East Bengal voice. To challenge this is to raise questions such as: how has its exclusion or silencing altered the national narratives produced to represent the subcontinental experience – the production of a homogeneous, universal, disembodied subject and ideology that authorizes the discrimination of those integrated within or excluded from this symbolic frame (Pease 1992)? How do constructions of the East Bengal(i) other shape what we know about the range and meanings of Partition experiences? How might situating a discussion of East Bengal, in a relation similar to that which explores the position of women in feminist debates on nationalism, or on the relationship between gender and violence, recast discussions of Partition and draw attention to the contradictions and ambivalences that frame our understanding of this period?
Before proceeding, it is useful to note that contemporary interest in Partition has been shaped by three historical contingencies. First, communal politics in India in the 1980s rekindled interest in a prior period similarly characterized by communal distrust and violence. Second, in the past twenty years, intellectual debates have addressed the limitations of nationalist and state narratives of struggle and change and drawn attention to the importance of histories from below, and from those far removed from the centres of power and control. Third, the people who lived through and directly experienced the events of 1947 are all in the latter years of life. To capture their stories it is critical to begin documenting their experiences immediately. A rethinking of state and elite histories of Partition is thus being attempted in light of these contingencies.

Using these historical contingencies to organize the discussion, I begin with a brief reading of the political context that has given rise to renewed interest in Partition. This is important for two reasons. First, renewed interest in the Partition is a political project rather than one that originated in the academy. As I will suggest for the Indian case, interest in Partition signals, for both the political Left and Right, opportunities to create an alternative nationalist narrative with important consequences for relations on the subcontinent generally. Silence about Partition among Bangladeshi scholars may reflect the view that 1947 is not worthy of comment given the more important 1971 struggles between East and West Pakistan. In this context, interest in the language movement that helped to realize Independence is evident, while a focus on Partition, which might expose what some experienced as the contradiction of supporting Pakistan and subsequently struggling for an independent Bangladesh, is avoided.

But why, you might ask, be concerned about India at all if one is attempting to understand the silence on these themes in Bangladesh? This brings me to the second reason for examining the political context; we are concerned because discussions of Partition emerged in India where the intellectual community is appreciated for generating theoretical and empirical, i.e., historical, debates that are important for India, the subcontinent, and for intellectual inquiry globally. In other words, debates on nationalism in Delhi or Calcutta contribute to rethinking these concerns elsewhere (cf. postcolonial and subaltern analyses). Moreover, despite varying contexts, the South Asian intellectual elite continue to engage in debate across national borders.

The contemporary past

Resurgent interest in the Partition has been promoted, in large measure, by efforts to understand the communal riots in India since 1984. As Pandey notes:
choice rather than an effect made on the basis of forgetting or not noticing its presence.

8 For Pease (1992), gender, class and race have similar valences of inclusion and exclusion.

9 This was the rationale behind the desire to develop a Partition archive in Dhaka proposed by Ahmed Kamal who, in working with Gyan Pandey, highlighted the importance of interviewing those who directly experienced the Partition.

10 See note 5 for a parallel with respect to the Urdu literary community.

11 I make this claim to highlight the porosity as well as reclaiming of national borders, a point which undoubtedly has ramifications for interpreting responses to the writing of Taslima Nasreen as well as for understanding popular discourses describing the Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi other from either inside or outside their national border.

12 While there is considerable debate and disagreement among right-wing parties over political strategy and tactical positions, there is general agreement

Motivated to make sense of contemporary Indian elite and everyday politics, it is hardly surprising that the last decade has witnessed a voluminous exchange on Partition that is sustained, in part, because of the continuing threat and dramatic increase in communal violence, the reshaping of nationalist sentiments, and a critical awareness of the salience of gender, patriarchy and women to these discussions. The chilling political climate of today recalls, as Menon and Bhasin note, the effects of Partition that have lingered in collective memory: 'Each new eruption of hostility or expression of difference swiftly recalls that bitter and divisive erosion of social relations between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, and each episode of brutality is measured against what was experienced then' (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 1). Indeed, many contemporary writers reflect this sense of the fundamental place of the Partition in the Indian conscience and in (re)constructions of the nationalist narrative. Samaddar (1997:7), for instance, makes this point plainly evident: 'the given history of Partition has left very little space for its political neutering'. What is interesting here is that both the political Left and Right deploy this insight to depict relations within India as well as between India and her bordering states.

Without calling into question the significance and critical importance of violence to the nationalist narrative, it is this connection that gives a retelling of Partition its current salience. It is consequential to note as well that the urgency for a retelling of Partition today both establishes discourses of communalism and nationalism as hegemonic, and provides a political context for establishing communalism and retheorizations of nationalism as primary loci of debate.11 For example, the rise of the Hindu Right12 has been accompanied and, it must be added, enabled by a commitment to recast religious and gender relations and to move away from the secular discourse that is embodied in the Nehruvian tradition (Sarkar and Butalia 1996). This is exemplified by the dramatic debates over the Uniform Civil Code, the Shah Bano case, and explanations for demolishing the Babri Masjid, debates which contribute to the varied ways in which 'difference' is encountered as well as reproduced in public discourse (Jayawardena and de Alwis 1996; Sarkar and Butalia 1996). My intention here is not to mark the single event13 that led to altering the ways in which people constructed understandings of community by drawing attention to the past; rather it is to stress how characterizations of
on the broad question of secularism, nationalism and commitments to how religious and ethnic differences are to be understood. Similarly, debate may highlight divergence among left parties and groups, but there is a shared commitment to the broad principles of the secularization of politics.

13 Others, for example, stress the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the 1984 riots. 14 On this point see van der Veer’s (1993) critique of Louis Dumont, where he argues that the orientalist discourse on the essential difference between Hindus and Muslims is a product of, rather than explanation for, particular relations among difference.

15 Here it is useful to distinguish between the political project offered by the subaltern perspective and the ways in which such a perspective has been theorized and deployed in analyses. See, for example, Sumit Sarkar’s compelling critique (1997).

16 An underlying theme in much of this work, especially Chatterjee’s, is the present reconstitute interest in the past, offer a particular rendering of that past and, perhaps most significantly, employ this rendering to build an alternative hegemonic discourse of the present. As Das (1996a: 14–15) cautions us in her discussion in another context, the state’s assertion and arrogation of authority created a space for social scientists, as well as politicians, to raise powerful voices in support of tradition, making it difficult to overcome the seductive nostalgia which informs concepts of community and redefines relations between self and other. For Das (1996c: 121), this reconstruction of communal difference is constituted in language which ‘functions more to produce a particular reality than to represent it.’ 14 This means recasting relations between communities and reorganizing institutional practices, including altering the history curriculum, to tell a different story, to enable a growing Hindu Right to transform the popular discourse on religion, ethnicity and difference. The result is the establishment of a new rationale – based on a naturalized and essentialized view of religious difference to legitimate communal tensions that are simultaneously intra-national and international, shaping relations between India and her Muslim neighbours, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The interests of the Indian Left, by contrast, are to sustain, and perhaps push further, discussions of secularism to include a better understanding of the relationship between religious identification and the state. In these efforts, there is recognition that ‘models of secularism and equality alone cannot displace the growing influence of the discourse of Hindu communalists’. But, as Kapur and Cossman (1996: 110) argue, ‘We must then struggle to displace Hindutva, and to establish alternative visions of secularism and equality as dominant.’ Thus, both the Right and the Left are committed to addressing issues within communalist and nationalist discourses, even if they do so for different reasons. Such a framing might indeed be necessary given the immediacy of the concern, but, as a consequence, this framing tends to limit, if not foreclose, opportunities to explore other issues and interests or address the concerns of marginal constituencies for whom the frame of communalism may be less salient. By so doing, popular discourse centres on the question of difference and reshapes the nationalist narrative in this image.

The link between feminist and subaltern interests and those of the Indian Left is clear: to recover the meanings offered by and draw attention to women and members of dalit, tribal, and ethnic communities whose voices have been silenced or marginalized in contemporary political debates. Feminists and a broad constituency of the Left have sought a more complex reading of (religious) difference in order to better understand the ways in which the Hindu Right institutionalizes new processes of identity formation in their efforts to mediate symbolic and structural relations, while simultaneously generating contradictory opportunities for women. It does so by combining contradictory appeals to both traditional notions of community obligation
and liberatory messages that are often associated with increased labour market participation and public participation in the political arena (Sarkar and Butalia 1996; Chatterjee 1993: 116-34). These initiatives parallel relations between East and West Pakistan where the liberatory potential of a Muslim brotherhood and shared cultural/religious identity is offered in the context of a colonial relation of unequal representation, suppressed voices and exclusion from the administrative and institutional hierarchies of government, the military and the academy.

In contrast to the political climate in India, contemporary political interests in Bangladesh can be viewed in relation to how they seek to position Bangladesh within South Asia. One principle upon which this process is organized combines appeals to notions of community obligation and liberation from Hindu domination, with the liberatory message of a shared Muslim identity and opportunities for social mobility. Pakistan's failure to deliver opportunities for mobility and self-realization was the basis for the liberation struggle twenty-five years ago, and one that continues to draw youth into religious political parties and movements. A second feature around which the interests of Bangladesh emerge is the rape and mutilation of women and their kin, as well as the systematic murder of the country's intellectual elite during the liberation struggle. Indeed, the destruction and pain wrought on Bangladeshis during 1971 parallels the violence wrought on so many in Punjab during Partition. Moreover, the proximity of the liberation war experience, its horror and the belief that Partition and the language movement were natural precursors to independence is supported by the finding that most social and political histories of Bangladesh offer only scant mention of the anti-colonial struggle and the Partition in the 1940s (cf. Harun-or-Rashid 1987; Islam 1992; Kabir 1994). Even Ahmed (1988), who, in examining Islamic identity formation during the long duree, suggests that Islamic movements in the nineteenth century are significant for contemporary Bangladesh, none the less skips over the meaning of Islam in the period of Partition. Like other scholars, Ahmed reads the past by directly referencing 1971 rather than by examining the processes that led to Independence as historically contingent. In so doing, these scholars suggest that the struggle for Independence was the inevitable and logical consequence of the events that are believed to have made it possible. By referring to Partition only in passing and focusing instead on the struggles which shaped relations with Pakistan – the question of legislative parity and representation and the demand for Bengali as a national language (Gordon 1978; Oldenburg 1985) – other scholars make even more direct claims to the inevitability of Bangladesh. For these reasons, interest in the Partition is superseded by renewed attention to the issues surrounding the 1971 struggle for Independence.

Concurrent with the rise of communal violence in India in the early 1980s has been the struggle against the military regimes of Zia Rahman and General
18 The fatwa against Taslima Nasreen for her heretical writings continues to have salience today as exemplified by contestations over her return to Bangladesh for her mother's illness and subsequent death. The consequence of her return for the government of Sheikh Hasina and for relations between the Awami League and the Jamaat remains an open question.

19 It would be a mistake to assume that communal strife does not characterize contemporary relations in Bangladesh, that the relationship between gender and nationalism is unimportant, or that anxiety among Hindus in the country is insignificant, especially when the appearance of Taslima Nasreen's novel could call for the issuance of a fatwa by a vocal Muslim extreme, the Jamaat-i-Islami. Important too are the religious/communal differences that have been highlighted with the passage of the 1988 declaration of a Muslim state and of fatwas against non-

Ershad in Bangladesh, including challenges to the passage of the 8th Amendment in 1988 which redefined Bangladesh as an Islamic state. This Amendment, passed under General Ershad, was the culmination of an alliance formed between the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, of Zia Rahman and the Islamist Party, Jamaat-e-Islam. Constructing political legitimacy under Zia included moving away from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's commitment to a secular state and lifting the sanctions on extremist religious parties with the passage of the 1977 constitutional amendment that substituted this commitment with the words, 'absolute trust in Allah'. Under both military regimes there was an increasing representation of religious political parties with a recognized voice in political decision making under Ershad.

The political rhetoric of the Jamaat during this period embraced a critique of western donor assistance and opposition to the growing representation and involvement of women in a rapidly growing non-governmental sector and, by the early 1980s, as participants in a rapidly expanding export garment enclave in Dhaka and Chittagong. These were responses to women's increased visibility while walking between work and home, using public transportation, and frequenting the markets and bazaars. Women from urban as well as rural communities and from all social strata were also increasingly involved in making demands on government and were active participants in oppositional movements, including in the broad-based movement for democratic elections and a democratic state in 1990. These efforts made women both the metaphor for western change and secularism, as well as a constituency to be targeted by the extremist religious Right (Feldman forthcoming).

Neither women's involvement in bringing down the Ershad regime; nor the demand by vocal members of the NGO community for electoral democracy; nor even Khaleda Zia's coming to power in 1991 led to a significant decline in Jamaat influence. For example, Khaleda Zia failed to censure the Jamaat-e-Islam for harassing NGO staff and beneficiaries and for their attacks on international donor and NGO support for women's education and self-employment. As Jahan (1995) points out, the Jamaat also promoted a rhetoric against Indian Hindus that was exacerbated by the communal riots following the destruction of the Babri mosque in December 1992 and revealed in their response to the publication of Taslima Nasreen's 1994 novel, Lajja. Contestations over the appropriate response to charges against Taslima Nasreen and to demands for redress for those seeking a trial for war criminals mark not only internal political alignments and alliances between secular and religious parties, but also the Bangladesh state's ambivalent relationship with Pakistan, particularly under the leadership of Zia and Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party and under Ershad's Jatiyo Party.

The 1996 electoral victory of Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who is the father of independent Bangladesh, has given a
governmental organizations that support women's programmes and threaten the security of Hindu families.

The complex and contradictory feelings of embarrassment and pride are difficult to fully explore here since, at the time, support for Pakistan was seen as support for a state that gave East Bengal a chance to emerge from Hindu domination and wield power as the majority in their own land. . . .

[Domination included economic domination] as tenants and labourers under Hindi zamindars or as artisans exploited by Hindu businessmen. Intellectually it included tensions over the fact that Hindus ruled educational institutions and politically it was Bengali Hindu leaders that drew on all-India political allies to exercise their hegemony from the anti-partition movement of 1905–1911 onward (Oldenburg 1985: 723). For a contrasting view of the zamindars that suggests a more complex picture of Hindu–Muslim agrarian relations in East Bengal see Ahmed (1997). Privileged place to memorializing the 1971 struggle as a bloody victory over Pakistan. The recent appearance of a number of films such as Muktir Gaan (Freedom Songs) to commemorate the popular initiatives of the war and the opening of a new museum with memorabilia and artefacts exhibiting the violence wrought on the Bangladeshi people by the Pakistanis in 1971, are indications that Partition and the 1947 anti-colonial struggle are understood as a very brief moment leading up to independent Bangladesh. Indeed, there is only one reference to Partition in the entire museum collection. This may be because Partition experiences in Bangladesh do not carry the scars and struggle that characterize those in West Punjab. Not surprisingly, then, with the return of the Awami League to power after a hiatus of more than twenty years, research on the 1971 movement for independence now, more than ever, claims centre stage, further marginalizing interest in the Partition period.

The choices that first led to acceptance of the two-nation decision and the initial allegiance to the authority of the Muslim League appear today, at least for some, to be a source of embarrassment, given the exploitative relations that sustained the Pakistani state between 1947 and 1971. The subsequent position of those challenging the Ershad regime and Zia government's leniency toward those regarded as war criminals, now living either in Pakistan or England, sustains this sense of awkward initial support for Pakistan. The popular struggles led by Jahanara Imam in Dhaka to bring to trial those defined as war criminals during the 1971 war; further underline the contemporary significance of the Independence movement as the critical moment in Bangladesh history. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the economic and political tensions between East and West Pakistan have attracted research interest, as has the 1952 language movement, positioning the events surrounding Partition as marginal. Encouraged by the victory of the Awami League and a twenty-fifth anniversary celebration, most progressive scholars devote their attention to documenting the history of the past twenty-five years and support efforts to reinstitutionalize a secularist state. With only marginal interest, it is perhaps not surprising that outsiders rather than Bangladeshis, have begun to focus attention on the Partition period.

Finally, it is important to note that I am not suggesting that exploring the experiences of Partition in East Pakistan should be the responsibility of any particular intellectual community, or that questions of nationalism and the Partition struggle should necessarily be significant for anyone on the subcontinent. I am simply noting that the failure to examine the significance of an East Bengal/East Pakistan perspective in discussions of Partition results in missed opportunities for research, the consequences of which include a view of Partition that either sustains an elitist history focused on state decision makers, or highlights the torture, violence and pain wrought on both Muslims and Hindus in the building of a nationalist (communalist) identity. I stress
21 British support for the documentary film, *War Crimes*, was an initiative that sought to hold accountable those who murdered journalists, intellectuals, and academics during the war.

22 For an exception at this point because this locale, as territory, state and nation, and as a place with a specific history of state-building and national identity construction, offers an opportunity to examine a more complex history of the post-1947 period by adding a perspective on experiences that were, by and large, less traumatic, violent and immediate than those from the borders of Punjab. I make this claim because contemporary debates and writing, especially outside of Bangladesh, occlude or create the Bengal experience as the other. As I will argue in the next section, excluding these voices generates problems similar to those so well documented by scholars who have challenged the silencing of women in Partition histories.

The nationalist framing

see Guhathakurta (1997) on migration histories of Hindu and Muslim families dislocated by the Partition in Bengal. Also emerging work on relations between the Bengali majority community and ethnic minority communities. The latter focus is less driven by the desire to understand a horrific and violent communal past than it is by a long history of grassroots efforts of the border communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts to challenge the development projects, resettlement schemes, and the militarization policies initiated under Zia Rahman (1976–81) (Bhaumik, Guhathakurta and Chaudhury 1997). See, also, the recent contribution of Chatterji (1995), especially Chapter 6.

Constructing a nationalist order framed by concepts of insiders and outsiders indicates both how notions of difference are constituted within particular social spaces and how they are symbolically reproduced to legitimate an already existing territorial boundary. Like gender, nationality is a relational term whose identity derives from its inherence in a system of differences [and] is determined not on the basis of its own intrinsic properties but as a function of what it (presumably) is not.

But do particular narratives, whether of nationalism or Partition, achieve the ideological effect of an inclusive and putatively macropolitical discourse? Meta-narratives, as explanations are asserted to be all inclusive and depend on their ability to alter, transform, or incorporate other prevailing, oppositional narratives. Thus, in order to secure representation of its hegemonic interests, the nationalist narrative depends for its success on its ability to transform emergent counter-narratives while simultaneously retaining its imaginings in the 'larger' struggle. This political project of 'making [the nationalist] conscience genuinely collective is always an accomplishment, a struggle against other ways of seeing, other moralities, which express the historical experiences of the dominated' (Alonso 1994: 380).

Partha Chatterjee (1986, 1989) is among the clearest exponents of the rationale for a rearticulation of a reformist gender politics in the context of a nationalist struggle. He shows how the social practices that sought to realize national sovereignty were part of a process characterized by a set of institutional and normative practices that would train the new, 'non-colonized' woman. These normative practices conflated women with tradition, situated in the inner domain of sovereignty (Chatterjee 1993: 107); the home whose essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world (ibid.: 120). It is a view that marks women's bodies as weak, soft, emotional and in need of regulation, protection and control – the typically bourgeois virtues characteristic of the new social forms of disciplining – (while simultaneously constructing the woman) as a sign for the nation, namely, the
23 For a recent exception see Samaddar (1997).

24 Implying 'some element of alterity for its definition', a nation is 'ineluctably shaped by what it opposes... [and is characterized by an] insatiable need to administer difference through violent acts of segregation, censorship, economic coercion, physical torture, police brutality' (Parker et al. 1992: 5). Nationalism both as an ideology and a political movement, 'holds the nation and the sovereign nation-state to be crucial indwelling values... which mobilize the political will of a people' (Kramer 1997).

Chatterjee argues, for example, that the ideology of nationalist politics provides the normative mode of what is defined as the political, and the imagined community of nationalism authorizes that which is the most authentic unit or form of collectivity (Chatterjee 1986). It is, according to Kramer (1997: 526), a discourse of gender and ethnicity that shapes individual identities and also expresses anxieties about sexuality, culture and respectability.

25 These spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, (and) religiosity (Chatterjee 1993: 129). This view paints postcolonial nationalism in South Asia (with) a chauvinist hue, tinged with misogyny (Jayawardena and de Alwis 1996: xii), where patriarchy is seen to regulate a freedom given and allowed, but never autonomous and owned.

We know too from feminist analyses of Partition (Butalia 1993, 1994, 1997, 1998; Menon 1998; Menon and Bhasin 1993, 1996, 1998) that one consequence of these practices has been the systematic silencing of certain issues and interests; for example, the kin and communal violence and rape that was masked by the nationalist project. The need to draw this distinction helps to explain why the nationalist project is usually linked to analyses of Independence and less so to analyses of Partition. In Bangladesh, however, this separation is impossible since it is the 1971 struggle that is marked by violence and rape, the culprit being members of the Muslim brotherhood. Analyses of Partition outside of Bangladesh, however, systematically silence issues that suggest that for East Bengalis the events represent a sense of coming into one's own, a freedom in the potential of greater representation and belonging, rather than the violence of pain constructed on the basis of communal hatred.

Thus we move from the 'generality of Partition... as it exists publicly in books' (Butalia 1997: 14) to an exploration of both the horrific assaults on human life and the rupturing of communities. These understandings offer two critical opportunities. One, to situate and comprehend that a shared sense of belonging need not depend on a homogeneous understanding of community, safe from conflict nor indifferent to difference, but that people in difference can share a common space. A better understanding of relations in East Bengal might offer important clues to this as a possibility. Two, to understand the processes by which this proximity turns to communal hatred, violence and rape (Das 1996c), to something so incomprehensible that it was only through literature, rather than history, that the stories of Partition could be recounted and the pain expressed (Ahmad 1996). To the credit of the women in the work of Butalia (1998) and Menon and Bhasin (1998) - and to the authors' this political project has enabled the next generation to learn from the past and to increase the likelihood that the 'act of [non-fiction] writing (about Partition) itself [might] exorcize the ghostly memories of what had been seen far too vividly and suffered much too viscerally' (Ahmad 1996: 194). But, what does a new imaginary of the relationship between nationalism and feminist inquiry offer to our understanding of Partition and how can feminist analyses help us understand both the absence of and the benefits to be gathered by adding the East Pakistani voice to debates on Partition and its aftermath? One can readily see the need to historicize and problematize the distinction between feminist struggles and nationalist ones or the othering of place in the construction of a national border. This hegemonic process of constructing a nationalist ideology depends upon distinguishing between self and other, us
interventions

contributions nuance the meaning of human agency and find expression in behaviours that had been hidden by the discourses offered by elite men constructing their Partition story(ies).

26 Feminist inquiry, as distinct from gender analyses, contributes to drawing attention to the processes of constructing hegemony embodied in relations that continually reproduce identification and difference, silence and voice, and a particular presence in efforts that seek its very exclusion. 27 Here I draw again on the critical insights offered by Sangari and Vaid (1989) who repudiate the notion of gender-neutrality and demand a gendered understanding of every aspect of explanation, a process that makes it impossible to offer an historical account that would include the perspective of women but would exclude the ways in which gender relations are imbricated in everyday life. Exemplifying this are the contradictory ways in which women are incorporated yet marginalized in

and them, in the creation of a common (shared) identity; women as symbol, men as agents of the nation; colonized space as feminine, colonial power as masculine. It is in relation to a feminist episteme that we can see a similar process in the creation of the East Bengali other as a counterpoint to the powerful Indian or West Pakistani.

The process of othering, however, is not fixed; rather, it is a process that continually reproduces how members of different communities are constructed and viewed. It is, to borrow a phrase used earlier, always an accomplishment, the specifics of which are always in motion. Using often coercive practices, history is both drawn upon and rewritten so as to authorize the other as enemy, powerful and feared, yet weak, effeminate and impure, while the self is constructed and reproduced as the legitimate arbiter or right. This contradictory process of enacting the power of difference depends on recognizing that relations are always situated. Thus, as Haraway (1988) and hooks (1984) argue, there is always a view from somewhere, a place or location that matters, since as historically embodied subjects, we are always in a particular, if contradictory, relation to this process.

Here I wish to argue that the distinctions drawn between self and other, woman and man, Muslim and Hindu, Hindu and Sikh can also be drawn between ‘places’, since social location, or social and personal geographies are actually embodiments of particular histories and experiences, contested relations of power and domination. Exemplified by the projects of state building as well as nation building, each depends on constructing difference so as to enable the drawing of boundaries, of mapping place. This means that the exclusion of East Pakistan/Bangladesh from the Indian or Pakistani nationalist narrative is actually an inclusion of place as difference, a transformation, as it were, of its meaning and signification. Complicating this is the particularity of the East Bengal case, where there is a re-identification between people and territory/state 'naturalized through the visual device of the map, which represents the world of nations as a discrete spatial partitioning of territory', always contentious and usually with ‘bleeding borders’ (Alonso 1994: 382). The building of the nationalist project and of the Partition story, in other words, is a social practice that incorporates difference in a particular way, as an exclusion. Said this way, the exclusion is a presence, its very invisibility a constituent part of the Partition story that is told.

Stressing differences between Hindu and Muslim Bengalis, for instance, is first and foremost a contribution to building a distinctive view of the self. This parallels the way in which West Pakistanis distinguished among the Muslims in East Pakistan during the independence struggle:

This is a war between the pure and the impure. . . . The people may have Muslim names and call themselves Muslims. But they are Hindu at heart. . . . We are now
nationalist movements, including in the Rashtra Sevika Samiti and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Bacchetta (1996) argues that because of pre-existing feminine solidarities (in India) . . . (and a wide) range of representations of femininity in the Hindu symbolic . . . the gendered fractionalization of Hindu nationalist discourse is ultimately a function of its unifying praxis. The contradictions that emerge because of women's autonomous activities as agents rather than victims or followers is critical to understanding opposition to and movements for change. Such a proposition highlights the need to examine gender relations as aspects of complex cultural processes that do sorting them out. . . . Those who are left will be real Muslims. (Mascarenhas in Oldenburg 1985: 729)

Understanding how East Bengalis actually saw themselves in the community of Bengalis, and how they have been marked as the Muslim other by Pakistanis during the struggle for Independence, and by Pakistanis and Indians during the Partition, would enrich our understanding of the presence and absence of voice, othering, and the salience of the subaltern in interpretations of the Partition. Opening the discussion in a way that focuses on these contestations would also draw attention to how Bengali, rather than Muslim, identity represented a dynamic process of identity formation and the building of nationalism (whether in India, Pakistan or Bangladesh).

A project to explore the constitutive constructions of self and other on both sides of the border would encourage further the shift in analytic focus from institutionalized politics to the building of nationalism as a social project that depends on the specificity of relations and cultural meanings on both sides of the border. Such a view, in the Gramscian tradition of constructing or realizing a hegemonic project, would interpret forms of inequality or difference, whether concerning women or minority constituencies, not as effects of nationalist efforts, but central to enabling its realization. Moreover, it would query the nation-state as given and reveal more transparently, how activities on either side of a (national) border are part of the process of constructing the nation.

These cartographies of identity, gender and landscape (Nash 1993) are actually processes which make the division of place possible and establish the conditions under which it can occur. As Nash (1993) argues, the act of naming and mapping assert the power of representation and, as such, suggest why the East Bengal perspective has been silenced in colonial efforts to control the weaker, feminine, backward, ignorant and yet feared Muslim from the East Wing. The experiences from East Bengal, then, offer us a particular view that would help to extend the view from the centre (Calcutta, Delhi, Lahore or of the elite), in some cases opposing it, in other cases identifying contradictory consequences of specific practices, but in all cases offering us a more textured and complex interpretation than is presently available on the experiences and meanings of Partition.

Concluding remarks

Accepting the feminist critique of othering of binary oppositions enables us to more readily appreciate the importance of questioning both the distinction drawn between the hinterland of East Bengal and the urbane centres of high politics (about which a focus on the Muslim League is perhaps the only place where there is significant voice given to a few East Bengalis). We should also
which gender relations are enacted.

28 As early as December 1948, the Bengali scholar, Dr Muhammad Shahidulla, himself a devout Muslim, had, in a speech delivered at the East Pakistan Literary Conference held in Dhaka, boldly asserted: It is a fact that we are either Hindus or Muslims, but the more important fact is that we are all Bengalis (quoted in Ahmed 1997a: 34).

be able to question the significance of the notion of difference and its consequences, to make visible the place of the subaltern, the Muslim, the East Bengali. My point in this essay is simple, if perhaps in need of restatement: despite mention of the Noakhali riots, the role of Fazlul Huq in the politics of the Muslim League, and the migration of Hindus from East Bengal to West, and of Muslims from West to East, there is little discussion of these events and relations in the new histories and debates that are emerging about the 1947 Partition. Such an interpretation leads one to assume either that Partition is insignificant for East Bengal or that the East Bengali experience is insignificant for understanding Partition in India and Pakistan; an interpretation that is troubling for two important reasons.

First, the stories of Partition – of the pain, horror, and rape – need to be counterposed to other experiences of Partition, to the hope and opportunity promised by the creation of a Muslim state. The second reason resides in the notion that the stories from East Bengal would likely complicate the search for a grand explanation or narrative of the past. It would highlight the contradictions posed by such events, the many different layers of intention that lie behind defining oneself in relation to the changes wrought by the decree of Partition, and the events which unfold in its wake. It would also lend support to the argument against ahistorical narratives embodied in a (dominant male) universal subject, supporting instead a complex and contradictory unfolding of events in history.

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