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Ritu Menon, ed. *No Woman's Land: Women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh Write on the Partition of India.* New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004. vi + 202 pp. $15.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-81-88965-04-5.

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Ongoing History, Continuing Effects

Ritu Menon's edited volume *No Woman's Land: Women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh Write on the Partition of India* is an important addition to the growing body of scholarship revising and reconstructing the history of two critical moments in modern South Asia: the Partition that resulted in the emergence of India and Pakistan as independent nation states in 1947, and the subsequent carving out of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. While historians of South Asia are familiar with the official statistics, it may be useful to rehearse them for readers of H-Gender-Mideast. In the space of a few months in 1947-48, an estimated twelve million people moved between the new nations of India and the two wings of Pakistan in the west and the east. Of these, an estimated ten million moved in the west alone. Widespread killings, looting, abductions, and rape accompanied this forced migration of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in the west, and Hindus and Muslims in the east. Estimates of the dead range from 200,000 to two million, with most people accepting that around one million people died. An estimated 75,000 women were abducted and raped by men of a different religious community. In the last decade or so, scholars and activists have revisited this traumatic history and sought to excavate its lived experience through recovering the testimony of survivors, largely in India and to a lesser extent in Pakistan and Bangladesh. In doing so, they have subverted the official histories and politics of these nation-states that have demonized the perceived enemy, burdened their women with the honor of the nation, and obscured their own histories of culpability and collusion.[1]

No Woman's Land is a collection of essays and testimonies from women who were forced to migrate across new national borders and women involved in state-sponsored rehabilitation efforts. The volume also contributes to enriching our understanding of Partition as an ongoing history, as several of the contributors contemplate the continuing effects of Partition on the lives of women across the nation-states of contemporary South Asia.

Sara Suleri writes movingly of her father, the writer and journalist Z. A. Suleri, and the evolution of his career from fierce enthusiasm for the idea of Pakistan to sharp criticism of its government by the sixties and especially the seventies. She also locates her own decision to come to the United States as a graduate student within the turmoil of a contested nationhood. As her father protests, "The genesis of Pakistan was not Islam! … It was different: it was Muslim nationhood!" (p. 36). Ismat Chugtai, the well-known Urdu writer, reminisces about her contemporaries, and the debate in the forties and fifties about the role of writers in times of political crisis and intercommunity violence.

Manikuntala Sen was a prominent member of the Communist Party in Bengal, one of the two provinces of British India that was divided territorially and that therefore bore the brunt of the Partition and the mass migration in 1947. The two excerpts from her memoir in this volume encourage us to rethink the complex role of women in this history. Her account of the riots in Calcutta in August 1946, a full year before Partition, highlights the quiet heroism of ordinary individuals who risked their lives to protect neighbors and friends of the other community. On the other hand, she also remembers the involvement of women in instigating and encouraging such violence.

Shehla Shibli's essay captures the cosmopolitanism of Lahore's intelligentsia in the forties and fifties. She points out the frequency of inter-community marriages in these circles precisely when Partition loomed and aggravated the polarization between communities: "… It seems ironic that so many of the intelligentsia should have been hunting for solutions other than those the politicians were finding …" (p.88). Ritu Menon's own essay in the volume recreates a Lahore of migrant memories in North India that bridges nationalist divides and

territorial borders as she crosses and re-crosses them in the eighties and nineties.

Among the most moving accounts in this collection is Meghna Guhathakurta's "Two Women, One Family," which follows the author's mother and grandmother in the eastern province of Bengal as their lives were transformed by not one, but two Partitions, in 1947 and then again in 1971. Guhathakurta presents a stark account of the material and emotional costs involved in decisions to migrate or remain within new national borders. She also reminds us of individual struggles for alternatives to communitarian identity politics, and of the enormous personal costs of such struggles.

Several of the essays help to re-create the texture of life in the refugee camps established by national governments to deal with the huge influx of migrants. These essays vividly capture the difficulties of providing infrastructure, relief, and eventually rehabilitation in the camps, as local officials sought to encourage families and women to support themselves by finding employment or starting small enterprises. Jogendra Singh, who served as the female commandant in one such camp, recollects the distinct needs that emerged from having significant numbers of women residents. As she remembers, while some women were molested when they were residents of the camp, particularly as they began finding employment in the outside community, "most cases were of willful consent." While abortion was illegal at the time, the camp had its own doctor. Singh remembers the young women in particular: "Their husbands had died, they had nothing in life. How could they survive? I took a very broad view of these things, although at that time we had to keep all this a secret" (pp. 191-2).

Together, these essays provide scholars with a rich and complex picture of women's responses to Partition: as victims of rape; as members of families deciding to migrate or remain; as perpetrators of violence along with men; as targets of familial and national pressure to return to "their own" land and family; and, most importantly, as survivors. Thus Manikuntala Sen remembers the numerous migrant women who bore the burden of supporting their entire families, and of the resultant "awakening" among them: "They formed the majority of the working women of West Bengal [in independent India]" (p. 72).

The editor's introduction, in contemplating the effects of political conflict upon the lives of women, captures the major themes of the essays poignantly. Scholars and students unfamiliar with the history of Partition or South Asia, however, may require more historical context. Similarly, an appendix providing brief biographies of the writers, intellectuals, and politicians mentioned in these essays, would have helped non-South Asian readers. Apart from such minor complaints, though, this volume provides a wonderful collection of primary materials for courses not just on modern South Asia, but also on women and nationalism and women and political conflict in general.

Note

[1]. Significant recent works include Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1998); and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998).

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