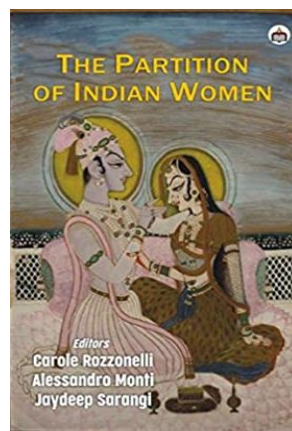


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**INTERROGATING THE GAZE: A REVIEW OF *THE PARTITION OF INDIAN WOMEN*  
BY CAROLE ROZZONELLI, ALESSANDRO MONTI AND JAYDEEP SARANGI (EDS.)**

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To use the word “partition” with any reference to the Indian subcontinent is to metonymically invoke a disturbed historical baggage of rupture, mistrust, violence and overwhelming loss. To employ the word with regards to Indian women in particular ushers in further connotations of injustice and unrest. What nature of partition does the work undertake to identify, one is tempted to ask. Clarifying the subject of the book in her befitting endorsement for it, Angelie Multani writes

*The Partition of Indian Women* is not a collection of essays on the Partition of India and its effects on women of India but a rich collection on the representation of women in all the diverse and cultural fields of literature and popular culture, from the Ghazal to the mainstream Hindi film. Wide-ranging and critically acute, this is a great source for all those interested in the ways in which women have been (mis)represented (back cover)

An eclectic mix of poems, academic articles on both Indian literature and cinema, and an interview with a Dalit feminist writer, this many-layered work attempts a compound interrogation of the representation of women in mainstream Indian culture. As one reads through the book, one finds the idea of ‘partition’ foregrounded, here, at several levels. The

broad idea watermarking the volume is certainly the global patriarchal partition of women and men, with the concentration of power in the hands of the latter group and the subordination of the former. With regards to Indian cultural scripts, there is the further idea of the partition of women's lived roles and identities from their popular representations. In their Foreword to the collection, for instance, the Editors point out that such representations "can be sometimes seen as a male soliloquy rather than a true dialogue" (9) with the result that women's actual experiences can be vastly different from their imagined cultural projections by male artists for a predominantly male audience. The foregrounding of a third level of partition, I believe, is aesthetically accomplished in the book through its diachronic frame of analysis. Beginning with a survey of the rise of the "new woman" in nineteenth-century Bengal, the essays traverse an expansive temporal history of literary and cinematic embodiments of Indian women to arrive at the present. In revealing how (mis)representations of women in the present echo the past, the book signifies a partition between temporal progress and a rigid ideology of gender, power and morality.

Astute, incisively analytical and intellectually muscular, the essays focussing on women in Indian cinema in this collection are a treat for every reader/scholar. One marvels at the staggering range of films that Rozzonelli and Monti bring into the discussion and their deft interweaving of these narratives for critical examination and comparison. Around fifty-four well-known postcolonial films ranging from *Andaz* (1949) to *Kahaani 2* (2016) feature in the engrossing discussions of this book, reiterating the centrality of Bollywood in framing and endorsing right-wing ideologies of gender and culture. Each essay has its distinct tone and tenor as it attempts to read the representation of women vis-à-vis the idea of the nation. Plots, themes, characters, dialogues, songs, sounds, cinematography – every little detail is taken into account to explore the film's subconscious and its symbolic articulation of the nation's subconscious in turn. The essay "Romancing India", for instance, offers a brilliant study of spatiality in Indian romantic films, exploring links between physical space (rural/urban), rituals of romantic love and different codes of sexual morality for Indian men and women. In a paragraph worth quoting, Rozzonelli and Monti write:

If difference is the key word to understand revendicative nationhood, it is repeatedly claimed for by cinematic heroines in distress, whose modesty is more or less overtly menaced. "Hindustani girls/women don't do that" is the manifesto of their corporate identity which excludes autonomy or the possibility of an infringing personal decision. [...] Morality is then a value which is encompassed by the nation-state, whose authority imposes what has

been termed a principle of separation (that is, a process meant to control individuality and the autonomous wish) between an unanimous “inside” and the private sphere of the “outside”. The love-story in Indian cinema seems to move away from the hegemonic clutch of the controlled “inside”, in a way that makes it possible to break or at least to circumscribe the limitations and the structures to which the private domain is submitted. (135)

In their interview with well-known Bengali Dalit feminist writer, Kalyani Thakur Charal, Jaydeep Sarangi and Bidisha Pal raise questions that are integral to the understanding of Dalit feminism and the larger scenario of women’s status in the country. “Literacy and education have reached to the Dalit girls much later,” states Charal. “Let alone the women, even the menfolk of the *Muchi*, *Methor*, *Dom*, *Hari*, *Bagdi*, *Bauri* communities have not yet been able to speak about their society or have been able to write their autobiographies.” (205) “A group of people has (thus) been made to lag; women have not even been noticed,” Charal points out. “When there have been discussions regarding the development of caste, a parallel discussion has always focused on gender development. But gender issues have always been suppressed under caste because of the verbose words of the upper caste women.” (207) An intersectional feminist standpoint will greatly benefit through a close engagement with an interview like Charal’s.

The poetry section of this book has been thoughtfully entitled “Patmanjuri Mala: A Garland of Friendship across Cultures” and constitutes, veritably, a garland that is woven symphonically by each individual poem in the collection. Here is a wealth of poetic diversity with poems by both men and women and from locations as different as India, France and Italy. Some of these poems centre around or reflect women but each of them, largely, offers a journey into a deeper, ungendered self that is nourished by memory, love and desire. In “Connaught Place”, a poem that reflects a deep-seated resentment against the current agenda of the Indian State to ‘nativize’ (which is only an euphemism for the promotion of a global right-wing Hindutva ideology) history through an arduous and questionable process of renovating and renaming places that establish their identity as non-Hindu/othered sites, Susheel Kumar Sharma begins with his fear of losing Connaught Place, a significant cultural site to this official fanaticism:

The Georgian architecture of CP  
Reminds me of the imperial glory  
But I don’t wish it to be pulled down  
Like the disputed structure in Varanasi. (236)

The poet goes on to describe how this colonial building has adapted to its postcolonial history, has homed gods, migrants and refugees with equal generosity, has watched both indigenous and capitalist industries growing, and has opened its arms to tourists, customers, tramps and vagabonds with the same humane acceptance – “Like a lover/ Enter it, anywhere without a protest./ All roads lead to the circular central love.” (236) The poet’s vision of Connaught Place as a site of “No discrimination between high and low,/ Indian and foreign, male and female” becomes an apt articulation of the vision of this book – a space sans partitions.

One is also greatly intrigued by the book’s cover which offers a depiction of emotional intimacy between Radha and Krishna, the Hindu deities who symbolize non-marital, sexual love. However, there is more to the cover than meets the eye. In her well-researched critical observations on the book’s polysemic cover, noted Indian feminist scholar Malashri Lal elaborates the history of the painting that the cover portrays, as follows:

It pictures Bani Thani who was a singer and poet in Kishangarh, Rajasthan, in the time of Raja Sawant Singh (1748–1764), whose mistress she became. It is believed that artists were commissioned to paint them as Radha and Krishna. One can read several aspects of “partition” in this narrative. Bani Thani which means “the beautified one” is separated from her birth name Vishnupriya, and known only by her function of entertaining her master. Second, and most crucial from the feminist research angle, Bani Thani is said to be a poet but no record exists of what she wrote, so a woman and her literary production are separated. Furthermore is the irony of Sawant and his paramour being cast as Krishna and Radha, the divine pair who are the epitome of love but could never be married. In the earthly terrain in which Bani Thani lived, she seems to be an emblem for woman’s “partitioned” or fragmented identity. I’m not sure these thoughts went into choosing the cover design, but the selection is fortuitous.<sup>1</sup>

To me, the cover also symbolizes a certain degree of Orientalism and the complexity of the idea of the “gaze” which looms large throughout this book. The woman on the cover gazes downwards, the man gazes straight at her and the entire depiction is framed by the painter’s male gaze. In the book, too, there is a case of hegemonic representations of Indian women (largely, men gazing at women) analyzed, partially, through the feminist gaze of the West which attempts to “lay bare the structure of a society which allows the subaltern imagination of women” (248) One laments that empowered portrayals of Indian womanhood in cinema have mostly been missed in these pages but what has been missed in cinema is balanced, to some extent, in the book’s explorations of literary texts like Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, Manju Kapoor’s *The Immigrant*, Mohammad Aleem’s *Rabia* and Imanyam’s *The Begetter*.

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<sup>1</sup> Lal, Malashri. “Book Review : *The Partition of Indian Women*”. *Confluence: South Asian Perspectives*. August, 2021. p. 12.

Erudite, methodical and well-argued, the book makes a strong case for the need and feasibility of studying women's cultural representation across genres and will be a valuable resource for scholars in the field of both women's studies and cultural studies.

#### WORKS CITED

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