

Article

John W. Hood

## The Lost Woman

### *An Aspect of the Plight of Solitary Women in Four Films about the Partition*



*Gadar. Ek Prem Katha*

It would be difficult to exaggerate the degree and intensity of the suffering, cruelty and devastation generated by the Partition of India in 1947.<sup>1</sup> It was a cataclysm of unrestrained destruction - of land and constructed property, moral values and common decency, and people's bodies, minds and souls. Even before August 1947,<sup>2</sup> Otherness had been brought sharply into focus, made larger than life and evolved into an ever-present motivation for the prospering of moral anarchy. When massive social upheavals pervaded by acrimony and antagonism occur in history, suffering knows no communal or class distinctions; however, suffering is always more intense and widespread among the weaker sections of society. Women are especially vulnerable to flourishing mayhem.

The most severe suffering generated by the Partition was loss of life, to which women were perhaps more susceptible than men. Certainly, they were acutely vulnerable to rape, and

<sup>1</sup> Narendra Singh Sarila in *The Great Game. The Untold Story of India's Partition* (Harper Collins, 2005) offers a compelling argument that the division of the country was being planned several years earlier, an argument which is taken up in Gurinder Chadha's film, *Viceroy's House*, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> The Lahore Resolution, 1940, started the open campaign for creation of Pakistan and gave Jinnah a platform from which to assert his Two-Nation Theory.

even in the strange and perverted value system of a sexual brute, a raped woman is a worthless woman, so in so many cases, the killing of the victim provided an appropriate finale for her abuse. Many victims who were fortunate enough to survive their ordeals found suicide an option preferable to living with the shame of their vile ill-treatment. All females, including older women and little girls, were potential rape victims, and to prevent such a fate that also brought dishonour to family and community (according to men, who were highly unlikely ever to suffer rape), women of all ages were often constrained to commit suicide. There are many films like, for example, *Tamas*<sup>3</sup> and *Rajkahini*<sup>4</sup> that remind us of suicides that needed no prompting); so necessary was it that death should come before dishonour that even husbands and fathers slew their wives, sisters and daughters (as is illustrated in the opening section of *47 to 84*<sup>5</sup>.)

While the ravaging of women by brutish men is a stain on humanity that should be openly recognised and understood, it is as well that rape and its deathly finale should be limited by sensitive censorship for the sake of the security of society, given the volatility of many sections of the community and their readiness to be goaded into perpetrating acts of ‘righteous’ revenge. There are, however, some interesting films that deal with the harrowing experience of a woman being separated from her family and being taken in by a man from another community. In three of the four cases discussed here, the woman suffers great distress in being separated from her family, while in all four, the victims are treated well by the men who have taken them in. In one case, the man deliberately abducts the woman, while in the other three, he rescues her and gives her protection.



*Khamosh Pani* (“Silent Waters”, 2003) by the Pakistani filmmaker Sabiha Sumar is really about the insidious rise of state-sponsored Islamic fundamentalism under General Zia-ul-Haq some forty years after the Partition. Yet, the background of its central character is significant enough to the narrative to warrant some sympathetic

recognition, and this is given through a series of flashbacks. Central at the outset of this series is a Sikh man supervising the suicide of his womenfolk who are obliged to jump into a well. His daughter, Veero, manages to escape from him, and she runs away to be picked up – seemingly to be raped – by several Muslim men. However, the director very neatly turns the intended rape (if, indeed, rape was the intention) into a protective marriage. The Sikh girl, Veero, becomes the Muslim wife, Ayesha, and later a Muslim mother and a Muslim widow.

<sup>3</sup> "Darkness" Govind Nihalani, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> "A Tale of Kings" or "A Tale of the Raj", Srijit Mukherjee, 2015

<sup>5</sup> Rajeev Kumar, 2014. It also has the Punjabi title of *Hun Main Kisnu Kahunga* ("Where is My Country?")

Gradually, the film focuses on her son, Salim, and the fundamentalist narrative; so as not to clutter or distract from this, the flashback narrative is given skeletal treatment. The very bare facts are: Veero escaped her father's vile demand, and her flight was intercepted by Muslims, one of whom assured her that he would marry her; the marriage was duly celebrated, Veero embraced Islam and became Ayesha, and sometime later – maybe ten years – their son, Salim, was born. Soon after, the good husband died, so Salim never really knew his father, and Ayesha had little to say about him. It is significant that after her escape, he gave her protection; nothing is said about his intentions, but we are given no reason to believe they were anything but good. Circumstantial evidence – the simple but comfortable house Ayesha was left by him, her happy and calm disposition and her devotion to her teaching Islam to young children – might suggest that the marriage was happy or, at least, peaceful and undramatic. One thing points to the persistence of a scar from the past: Ayesha experiences difficulty going to the well and has others draw her water and bring it to her. The trauma of acknowledging her father's wish to have her dead is something with which she has never been able to reconcile herself. Eventually, she is visited by her brother, Jaswant, and here, symbolically, Sikhism and Islam must engage with one another. The endeavours of the fundamentalist activists to create enmity between the local population and a large group of pilgrim Sikhs are not entirely successful, given the goodwill of many of the townspeople; history, however, has made it impossible for Jaswant to successfully engage with Ayesha. He has been sent by their dying father to bring Ayesha back so that he might see her one last time. Ayesha's perception of this request's hypocrisy and vapid insincerity is immediate, and she remains true to her adopted faith. The sad irony is that her adopted faith might not stay true to her, for when the news gets out that she is a convert from Sikhism, her friends become uncomfortable in her company, and the fundamentalist activists assiduously cultivating Salim suggest that his mother's infidel origins might compromise his acceptability as a warrior of Islam. Ayesha's beloved son's attitude toward his mother becomes accusatory and reproachful, and ironically, this implicit, potential rejection has the effect that her father's goading was not able to bring about. And so her story begins and ends with a well. There is an escape from terror, then a happy marriage; and then, due to closed-minded extremism, years of loving motherhood turn sour, and love turns to self-sacrifice in the manner in which the father who now wants to see her for the last time – possibly to seek her forgiveness? – wanted some forty years earlier.

A very different kind of film is Anil Sharma's *Gadar. Ek Prem Katha* ("Rebellion. A Love Story", 2001) is little more than fatuous populism, though probably excellent cinema commerce. It is liberally sprinkled with simple truisms and clichés, swarms with stereotypical characters, excites with choreographed fights that are gratuitous and implausible, and emotionally reassures with unnecessary songs essential to the Hindi commercial cinema.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the narrative is protracted and cluttered, making its 170 minutes something of an endurance test. Nevertheless, the film raises some issues that are worth considering.

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<sup>6</sup> There is even an American pop song – *Que Sera*, first recorded by Doris Day in 1956, presciently popular, apparently, in India some ten years earlier!



An extensive opening section establishes the germination of the love of Tara Singh, the driver of a delivery van to an exclusive girls' school, for Sakina, the daughter of a wealthy and influential Muslim businessman, Ashraf Ali. The saintliness of Tara Singh is established first by keeping his impossible love to himself. Then comes Partition, prompting the desire or need of many millions of people to flee to the new country or, in the opposite direction, to the now-contracted old one. One of the few memorable – and credible - scenes in *Gadar* is at the station when, with great urgency, Ashraf Ali tries to get his family onto the train to Lahore. In the graphically realistic crush Sakina is restrained from boarding, and the train moves without her. For a girl not long out of school, this must have been a nightmare experience and, undoubtedly, one suffered by many. The myriad film clips and photographs of trains with passengers hanging out of doors and windows and crowding over one another on the roof bear witness to the likelihood that Partition trains, initially, must have been tough to board. The scene on the station continues long after the train has gone; it has become a picture of despair as people, exhausted or injured or even dead, lie about asleep or semi-conscious. A small group of petty criminals stealthily move through the disorder, seeking valuables to lift from unaware people. They come across the bloodied and dishevelled Sakina, and the possibility of abduction and gang rape looms larger than petty theft. Here, credibility runs out as Tara Singh fortuitously appears on the scene.

Single-handedly, the humble Jat and soulful lover subdue the many, takes his 'Madam-ji' home with him, and devotes himself to her protection. This is a very realistic need, for a lone woman of another community must have been perilously vulnerable, and Sakina's vulnerability extends to the residents of Tara Singh's neighbourhood who want the immediate removal of the Muslim woman from Tara Singh's house. This presents another real threat, for even usually decent people imbibing the spite-filled atmosphere of the time can be cruelly intolerant. Tara Singh's aunt suggests the most humane way out – send her to the refugee camp. This is acceptable to Sakina, for she believes, perhaps naively, that from the refugee camp, she would be sent to her uncle's house in Lahore. Given the baying dogs at the station the previous night and the pervasive hostility in this Sikh neighbourhood, it is essential to note that without Tara Singh, Sakina would be in a very precarious situation indeed.

Elements of quirky narrative so much enjoyed in Hindi commercial cinema are by no means missing from *Gadar*. Sakina and Tara Singh learn from a reliable source that her family's train was attacked, and everyone aboard was killed. Her father's watch of the effects of the dead at the local station would seem to corroborate this. Then, with an amazing economy, we are given the marriage of Sakina to Tara Singh and the birth of their little boy. It is not long, however, before narrative quirkiness reasserts itself, and Sakina just happens upon a scrap of newspaper bearing a picture of her father, the accompanying story informing her that he is now the wealthy and influential Mayor of Lahore.

The narrative then moves on to the efforts of the saintly Tara Singh to arrange a visit to Sakina's family in Lahore and the deliberate sabotaging of that endeavour by Ashraf Ali. Eventually, Sakina is able to go, but without her husband and son, who are denied visas. The

rest of the film deals with Sakina's home detention in Pakistan, Tara Singh's illegal entry with his son into Pakistan in quest of his wife, and the utterly spectacular, protracted and highly improbable struggle to escape Sakina's own family and their adopted country. In the end, Sakina is shot by a misdirected bullet fired by her father, taken to hospital, and, of course, saved. Ashraf Ali is remorseful, and the Indians return undiminished to India while the Pakistanis return hangdog to Pakistan.

And here is the real point of the film. While it says a bit about the plight of women at the time of the Partition, it is not about Sakina. The Sakina narrative merely provides a context for anti-Pakistan propaganda at a time when Indian mistrust of Pakistan had been resuscitated by the Kargil War of 1999. Patriotism can certainly ensure box-office success.

A couple of years later, but before feelings of hostility had started to fade, Chandra Prakash Dwivedi made *Pinjar* ("Beyond Boundaries", 2003), a worthy enough film in which propaganda and communal chauvinism are notably absent. *Pinjar* offers – or implies – a number of objects of criticism, particularly patriarchal attitudes to women, while the rigidity of traditional communal barriers and the potential for callousness in traditional Hindu family values are seen as stumbling blocks to social progress as well as to individual freedom.



After some introductory contextualising, The central narrative is a little way into the film. A Hindu marriage is arranged between Puro and Ramchand, but before the marriage can be celebrated, Puro is abducted by a young Muslim, Rashid. When he first sees Puro, Rashid seems to lose control and fall off his bicycle, producing laughter from Puro and her companions. From what we see of Rashid's sleazy uncles, it would be easy to believe that his abduction of Puro is an act of revenge for his humiliation a few days earlier, a simple act of communal malice, or both. It soon becomes evident, however, that it is strictly neither, but that the young man had experienced what is commonly known as love at first sight and is determined to have Puro as his partner. There is, however, an element of malice in the abduction, though not on the part of Rashid, who would appear to be a pawn in the crude machinations of his abject uncles. Apparently, between his and Puro's families, there has been enmity based on shady property deals, exacerbated by religious differences, leading to the inevitably inconclusive string of reprisals. The never-ending chain of revenge that seeks to justify so much Partition violence would seem to underlie the tragic plight of Puro. Pertinently, she asks Rashid, "My uncle kidnapped your aunt – where is my fault in that?"

Because of his positive feelings for Puro, Rashid feels regret for his actions and pity for her. Still, it would do the girl little good if he were to go back on what he has done and take her back to her family, for she has been polluted enough by intimate contact with a Muslim

man that she is no longer marriageable – at least not into a respectable family like Ramchand's. As traumatic as the abduction must have been, even more distressing is the rejection of Puro by her parents. For them, saving face is more important than providing care and comfort to their blameless daughter; indeed, it would have been a convenience for them had Puro died. Her brother, Trilok, will remain a rock of support for her throughout the film, though there is little he can do to set things right without jeopardising Puro's safety. It is not unreasonable to perceive an implication here that the contrasting attitudes toward Puro's situation, reflective of the sensibilities of two different generations, suggest the progressive outlook of the young as distinct from the dogmatic conservatism of their parents. In whatever way it is looked at, there is no humane argument for Hindu tradition as it applies to girls like Puro; indeed, it is just as cruel, ultimately, as the predations of abductors and rapists of an Other community. And it is evident that, while her family rejects their daughter, Rashid offers her tenderness.

Religious tradition and an assumed piety invade Puro's sensibilities again in the months after her baby – or, as she puts it, the burden of Rashid's sin – comes into the world stillborn. One day, an abandoned, deranged girl is delivering her baby outdoors, and Puro, followed by Rashid, comes to her assistance. In this case, the baby is born healthy, but the mother dies. Puro adopts the baby and becomes very attached to it, but the forces of conservatism conspire to remove that one joy from her life. The public conscience – in the form of the village elders, all men and Hindus – declares that the baby is a Hindu and should not be brought up by a Muslim. There is an irony here in that Puro, the wife of an abductor who has had the Muslim name Hamida tattooed on her arm, was born a Hindu. Nevertheless, two men and a woman are dispatched to seize the baby, who is unceremoniously wrenched from its adoptive mother's arms as, indeed, she was wrenched from the bosom of her family by Rashid. Communal malice dressed as righteousness again asserts itself, trampling the sensibilities of the innocent.

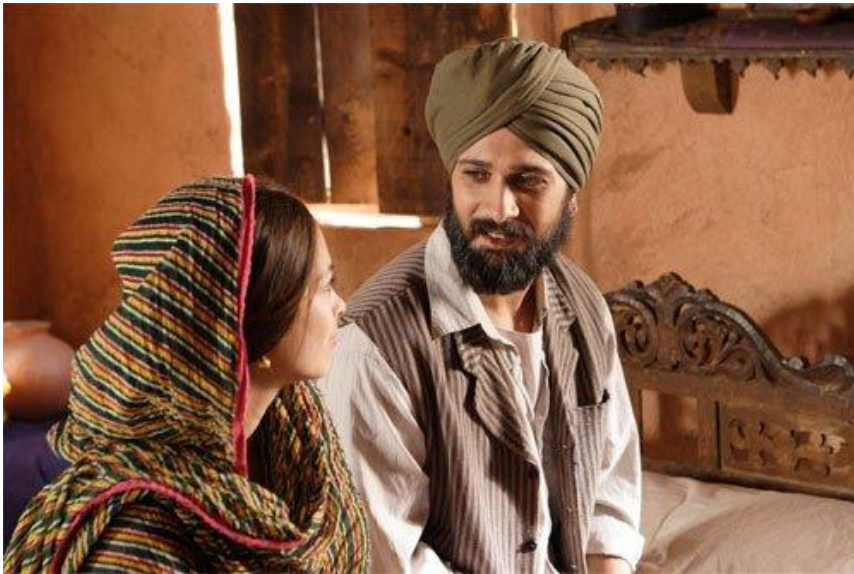
Then, the Partition is enacted. A title card indicating '1947' is followed by shots of enthusiastic crowds welcoming the creation of Pakistan, for apparently, that is where Puro and Rashid find themselves placed. A communal riot starts, and there are arguments over whether Hindus should migrate to the new India. There are shots of the refugee trail starting and soon becoming a target for the malicious goodbyes of Pakistani thugs. For Puro, the increasingly dangerous state of affairs would make her situation very uncertain.

At the Wagah Border Camp, indicated by a title card, there is a reunion of Trilok and Ramchand, and Puro manages to find Ramchand's abducted sister, Lajo, kept captive by a brutish lout but rescued from him by Rashid. We might note incidentally that Lajo's abduction, unlike Puro's, is of the conventional, sexual kind, and Lajo sadly considers herself a polluted woman whom no one will want. Another title card indicates 'Lahore, 1948' and the scene depicts the hurried evacuation of Hindu refugees to India. It is here that the film comes to its extraordinary conclusion.

The focal question now is, what will Puro do? Ramchand, a progressive thinker like Trilok, is willing to take her back but unwilling to disturb whatever happiness she may be experiencing. Rashid expects that she will seize the opportunity to end the aftermath of her



abduction and return with her kinsfolk to India. We see him sadly move away as the group is about to board the truck that will transport them to Amritsar. The decision, rightly, is made by Puro. She opts to stay with her abductor, the man who, despite his grave offence in stealing her in the first place, has given her and promises to continue to give her love and protection. Rashid is exonerated, it would seem, by Puro's magnanimous gesture of forgiveness that evolves out of so much negativity. In some ways, it is a sad ending, for not everyone will live happily ever after. Still, they will all be able to make the best of a moment in history when innocent people were caught up in confrontational machinations well beyond their comprehension.



Vic Sarin's 2007 film *Partition* bears some remarkable narrative similarities to *Gadar*. The narrative is initiated by a group of Sikhs launching a brutal attack on a column of Muslim refugees – exhausted, demoralised and largely unarmed – headed for Pakistan. The surprise attack sets the refugees to panic, and they are seen running in all directions to escape their assailants. For many,

it is a vain endeavour, and they are cruelly cut down. The assailants do not distinguish between men, women and children; according to the perverse revenge ethic that goads them, all are deserving of the sword, and for a time, vengeful brutality is what we see on the screen.

The attackers are from a nearby village. One is Avtar, a close friend of Gyan, both former soldiers in the British Army, though Gyan is not one of the assailants. After the attack, after dark, Gyan is out in the fields, and he comes across a girl stricken with fear, trying to remain hidden. It transpires that in the attack, she had become separated from her family (we will later learn that her father was one of the slaughtered), and she is now, despite her trepidation, determined to go on to Pakistan and eventually find them. She agrees to let Gyan give her shelter and protection for the night in his house, yet while she is there, she is terrified of the mood of hostility in the Sikh village toward one of the Other, albeit an innocent girl. The tension emanating from this fear is shattered the next day when her presence is discovered while Gyan is in the fields. As angry villagers descend upon his house, he gets back to it just in time to protect her, making it clear, quietly yet with chilling conviction, that for anyone who lays a hand on her, the consequences will be dire.

And so the Muslim girl, Naseem, stays in the Sikh soldier's house. As tensions slowly ease among the rest of the village, familiarity develops inside the house and, in time, intimacy. The romantic aspect of the film is tastefully represented and without indulgence. Time is covered in sweeps rather than detail, and the story is told by a perceptive camera rather than

by explicit or developed dialogue. What is clear is the development of a partnership. Unlike the situation in *Pinjar*, the man invites her, rather than physically conveys her, to his house, so their relationship starts on a more creative foundation and grows out of mutual need and affection. The man, of course, is protective of the woman, and in a pre-feminist society, this is as it should be; he protects her because he loves her, and she loves him because he protects her. She conceives and later gives birth to a little boy, Vijay.

During the War, Gyan and Avtar's commanding officer was an Englishman whose sister stayed in India after Independence, working for the Government to trace refugees and reunite families that had become separated. Gyan approaches her with a plea for help, enabling Naseem to track down her family and visit them in the new nation. A visa is arranged for her but not for Gyan and the little boy. Naseem travels alone to Pakistan with a return bus ticket valid for one month. Still, after the month is up and she has not returned to the village, we start to see a clear similarity with the narrative elements in *Gadar*.

Gyan's devotion to Naseem is put to the test during her unexplained absence, pushing him to the extreme action of having his hair cut, trimming his beard and taking a Muslim name to get a visa to Pakistan. At the border, there is, ironically, no concern about his Muslim identity. Still, he is prevented from entering the country because of some irregularity in his documents, so he and Vijay are obliged to enter illegally under darkness.

The intense hatred for the Other that was magnified on the day of the attack on the refugee column, especially with the slaughter of their father, seems not to have abated in Naseem's brothers, Akbar and Zakir. On his arrival at their home, Gyan is welcomed with a severe beating from Akbar, to which he offers no resistance. Naseem is being held captive in the house, and this is quite obviously a form of commodification of the woman, Naseem being used to bolster the brothers' acrimony and serve their somewhat twisted sense of honour. Eventually, the mother sees reason and helps smuggle Naseem out of the house.

The ending of the film is, sadly, quite realistic. A reunion of Naseem with Gyan and Vijay at the railway station is arranged, but Akbar and Zakir catch up with them. Gyan is caught in a fierce struggle with Akbar on the high footbridge over the railway line linking the station's platforms and is forced over the bridge, falling to his death on the railway track below. Akbar has killed a Sikh who never killed a Muslim, and Naseem returns to India with Vijay, but without the man who saved her life and gave her so much happiness. Such is the nature of Partition.

The *Partition* was enacted in haste, without thorough research into sociological realities in areas most affected by the new demarcation or careful investigation into its likely ramifications. Even more extraordinary is that once the forces that provoked dislocation and mass migration had been unleashed, there was virtually no supervision or direction with a view to maintaining peace and protecting life, if not property. Disappointment based on material loss turned quickly to frustration, attribution of blame mixed with ignorance to generate uncontrollable communal hatred, and in an atmosphere in which there was no intention to admit reason, reactions to suddenly perceived and unforeseen conditions were largely physical



and violently so. In an atmosphere where it seemed righteous to burn someone's house or destroy his crops or slaughter his livestock, women were fair game for the venting of lust, for the expression of insult and abuse and, ultimately, for killing as worthless objects. Of all the extremes of Partition barbarity, those perpetrated against women obliterated civilisation itself.

In this, there is a wealth of material for films that might be box office hits but promise little, if anything, moral edification. The four women discussed here all underwent traumatic experiences but ultimately were lucky in that they survived the mayhem. It is interesting to deconstruct that luck and consider what might have happened to them had the Other Man not come along. Veero was doubly lucky. Through her alertness, she escaped her father and the well. However, her saviour might not have been the good and honourable man he was. (And it is worth remembering that in such an infernal atmosphere, many good and honourable men had at least a moment of brutishness to carry on their consciences throughout their lives.) Had that been so, the well might have been mercifully expedient. Without Tara Singh, Sakina might have been brutally gang raped and discarded, or worse, by the louts who discovered her on the station platform. Puro would seem to have had the best chance of surviving the Partition undamaged, as she would have married Ramchand and enjoyed his protection. Clearly, the marriage would have been a happy one, too, as Ramchand is a good and attractive young man. Naseem would very likely not have found her way to Pakistan unscathed. Under cover of night, she may have got far from the village of the Sikhs who killed her father and who might well have killed her after raping her, but a young woman alone on the road in a border area would have been in a very precarious situation. Even though the scenarios of the four films discussed here represent a tiny minority of cases, their circumstances nevertheless point to actualities, dire and horrible, that might have occurred to them and which did, indeed, befall the vast majority of lost and separated women.

**Dr. John W. Hood is a Film Scholar and Author.**