INTRODUCTION – HISTORY, MYSTORY, OURSTORY

Partition is a word that I grew up knowing so little about, yet enough to understand that when it was spoken in my family, a daunting wall of silence would materialize and the discussion would quickly shift or be further silenced. I learned to recognize that this word carried a great deal of baggage that was not to be unpacked, as the material inside would bring about feelings of shame for the storyteller, as well as the listener. Yet those rare moments when my grandmother, father, or mother would take on this far off look and reminisce about stories “before Partition or after Partition”, I would hold my breath hoping to hear just a little bit more, knowing that moment could end instantly.

As a young woman I learned quickly how to understand what could and could not be spoken in my household. Stories of the Partition were one of these topics, along with female sexuality and anything related to the opposite sex, particularly with men outside of my racial and ethnic community. If I were to raise these taboo themes, the word Izzat (honor) would be thrust forward, as an explanation for what one could lose if these boundaries were crossed and the silence broken. These topics and stories accumulated into a list that I carried with me everyday, knowing that they were not to be discussed and as a woman understanding that there was much significance in the silence surrounding them, without ever knowing the details or questioning why. As curious as I was, periodically I would peruse this list in my head, daring to question these truths and searching for answers that would resolve all the silence in my family. These questions could not be broached to others without feelings of shame and guilt in doing so. Furthermore, much of this knowledge was passed down through symbolic messages spoken in metaphors; somehow I knew how to read these messages and translated them as territory I was not to enter. It was only recently that I began to connect all the stories and themes compiled in this “list” and understand the silence that surrounded them, which occurred when I launched into researching the history of my family and community. For the first time in my life I re-encountered historical stories of the Partition.

Upon my journeys into Partition narratives I came across the writings of Urvashi Butalia, Ananya Jahanara Kabir, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin. These writings were separated from the politically driven, patriarchal writings that dominated Partition history. These esteemed, South Asian, feminist scholars were the pioneers to...
uncovering a feminist historiography of India’s Partition and shed light on the stories of the women that had been silenced in the collective memory of the nation. As I began exploring the marginalized history of the women, children, and the Dalit community, I was confounded by what little I knew of this side of the Partition, but also haunted by how much I was impacted by this literature on a personal level. The most influential element of these readings were the narratives of the women and the analysis that accompanied it, which illuminated how women were symbolized in representing the Izzat of their family, community, and nation. As a result of this symbolizing, women’s bodies became the site of violence that ensued during the Partition. Women were brutally raped by rival groups; young girls and their mothers were forced to commit “martyr” suicide for the sake of family honor; numerous women were abandoned by families after being brutally raped and forced to marry the perpetrators of their assaults; and many of the children were displaced, kidnapped and sold to brothels and landowners (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998). One of the first passages I came across that exemplified women’s reality during the Partition, was by Kabir (2005) who articulated, “… as in other moments of collective violence, it was in the systemic rape of women that trauma and body were most obviously linked. Women were raped and mutilated during the mayhem of partition because their female bodies provided a space over which the competitive games of men were played out (Das, 1995)” (p. 179). These games and the violence perpetuated on women were many times in the name of Izzat, (or honor) the same word that I so often heard being used in my family, a word that I had embodied into my identity so far back I could not recall the very origins of when and where I first heard it.

The word Izzat can be loosely translated in English to mean honor, reputation, and/or the responsibility of an individual to his/her community, family, and at times their nation. As a second-generation Punjabi Sikh woman I grew up hearing the word Izzat to refer to how my actions are read by my family and community; how my body is read by others and the implications of this for myself and my family; how the community responds to my family’s choices; and even when speaking to the honor of our ancestral nation, India. The words of my mother, grandmother, and aunties ring in my ears when I think of Izzat and how the word and its complex meanings were passed down to me as I was growing up: “Ghar dhi Izzat kuri dha nhar rahndhi hai” (The Izzat of the household sits with the daughter of that household). As we will see later on in this essay, these words ring true for not only my upbringing, but for that of many other South Asian women.

As I read stories of the partition I was triggered. I felt the women’s stories so deep inside my soul that I could not distinguish whether I was in sorrow for the women I was reading about, or for myself. Images and stories of my own upbringing surfaced, but in different shapes, distinct colors and the memories took on different meanings. Linkages were being made to ideas I had not thought about before. I was connecting to these women’s narratives, because many of the values and beliefs that led up to the violence that was perpetuated on their bodies, including the concepts of Izzat, are still evident in my family and community within the Diaspora today.

As a result the following questions emerged, suggesting a necessary area of research that warranted attention: What are the experiences of second-generation