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**Subverting History: The Gendering of Partition and the Resistance of Rape and Violence through Anti-Memorials**

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**Article Received:** 09/11/2025

**Article Accepted:** 10/12/2025

**Published Online:** 11/12/2025

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.12.139

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**Abstract:**

The proposed paper aims to highlight the gendered violence of the Partition of India by examining anti-memorials through a critical lens. The paper also explicates the distinction between memorials and counter-memorials and delves into the visual artworks of the installation artist Pritika Chowdhry titled *Partition Anti-Memorial Project*. It necessitates the installation of anti-memorials to feature the significance of counter-memories and also to negate the one-sided historical narratives. It also shows how women's bodies had become sites of violence, communication and triumph during the communal riots through literary references. The emphasis is also laid on the importance of anti-memorials in articulating the silences in history.

**Keywords:** Anti-memorial, Counter-memory, Partition, Sexual Violence, Trauma.

**Introduction:**

Art and Literature are associated in myriad ways as representations of art are found in literature and vice versa. Feminist installation artist Pritika Chowdhry captures the horrendous crimes of the Partition of India through her Partition Anti-Memorial Project which she kickstarted in the year 2007 at the South Asia Institute of Chicago. This project depicts the traumatic geopolitical event that fragmented the nations of India and Pakistan in 1947 through the interweaving of art and literary references. As a counter-memory expert and an anti-memorial specialist, she has examined the tumultuous Partition through her installation of numerous anti-memorials. Being a feminist herself, she spotlights the gendered violence of the fratricidal sundering of the two nations thereby raising awareness about how the female body was exploited as a war weapon and a political artefact.

Memorials portray repressed memories and act as a bridge between the past and the present. They are stereotyped reminiscences of an event which are socially and politically accepted. Various groups often seek to officiate these dominant viewpoints and channel collective memory toward certain cultural and political ends. These *Lieu de Memoire* or sites of memory also facilitate the function of passing on the knowledge of a specific event to posterity. For instance, Partition Museum situated in Amritsar is installed by the Government of India which claims to fill the lacuna that no monument exists to memorialize the largest migration in human history.

Counter memorials or Anti-memorials have emerged as new techniques of art forms in commemorative practice. It can be defined by its oppositional quality to conventional monumentalism where monuments are simple, glorify either a person or state and reinstate an ideology. Whereas anti-memorials invoke the memories of darker events by portraying the troubling side of a phenomenon and also warning of the evils of the ideology that it stands for. They reinforce the importance of memory for politics and historiography. While traditional monuments throw light on famous figures of an event like war, counter-monuments admonish the perpetration of such evils and also highlight the tribulations undergone by the victims. A significant example of anti-monumentalism is *The Empty Library* in the Bebelplatz in Berlin, Germany. The monument contains layers of bookcases embedded into the cobblestones of the plaza. It memorializes the burning of over 20,000 books by Nazis, of multifarious genres written by eminent Jewish authors on May 10, 1933. The politically and historically significant anti-memorials originated in Postwar Germany and disputed the traditional viewpoints by presenting equally authentic marginalized standpoints. According to James E. Young, a distinguished University Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Massachusetts and also the founding Director of the Institute for Holocaust, Genocide and Memory Studies,

“ For young German artists and sculptors like the Gerzes, Norbert Radermacher, and Horst Hoheisel, the possibility that memory of events so grave might be reduced to exhibitions of public craftsmanship or cheap pathos remains intolerable” (272). Thus, they are contentious about conventional art forms and believe that they seal off the capacity for awareness. They also act as a kind of historical erasure which is interrupted by the creation of anti-memorials.

The counter monuments installed by the artist Pritika Chowdhry assume significance as they claim to disrupt the dominant historical narratives. She believes in the interweaving of texts and art forms. Accordingly, she makes use of the compositional strategy of intertextuality to title her projects derived from literary works. The project titled *Cracking India* alludes to the popular partition novel *Cracking India* written by the Parsi writer Bapsi Sidhwa which was published as *Ice Candy Man* in 1988. The novel treats the bodies of the females as sexual objects which have political significance. The anti-memorial comprises

pink neon sculptures that commemorate the Radcliff line which divides British India into India, East and West Pakistan. The artist has deliberately made use of the colour pink as it is associated with women, thereby gendering the Radcliffe line which also explicates the unimaginable brutality and communal violence inflicted on women.

In *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin talk about the range of violence committed against women, “tripping; parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding the breasts and genitalia with triumphal slogans; amputating breasts; knifing open the womb; raping, of course; killing foetuses—is shocking not only for its savagery, but for what it tells us about women as objects in male constructions of their own honour” (43).

There is no dearth of the account of these acts of violence recorded by artists and writers on how women's bodies were murdered and transported to the ‘other’ side of the border. In Sidhwa's novel, the Ice Candy Man shouts when the corpses of slaughtered women arrive at the railway station, “Everyone is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslims. There are no young women among the dead. Only two gunny bags full of women's breasts” (Sidhwa 159). The gory act of mutilating the women's breasts desexualises them and the branding of triumphal slogans like “Pakistan Zindabad!” and “Hindustan Zindabad!” marks the profound political horrors and humiliation faced by them. It also turns their bodies into sites of political violence and aspirations.

*What the Body Remembers: The Invisible Women* is a crucial anti-memorial that attempts to raise awareness of how sexuality is weaponized. The title is partly extracted from Shauna Singh Baldwin's historical fiction about the Partition of the same name. The anti-memorial installed by Pritika Chowdhry is a dismembered twice-life-sized, fragmented, lower female body playing jumping rope and hopscotch. She believes that mass rapes are either concealed in historical narratives euphemistically or erased without memorialization. According to her,

“This erasure of women's experience of rape and sexual violence from national discourse and monuments is troubling, at many levels. It silences women victims and denies them any opportunity of resolution and catharsis. The perpetrators of sexual violence go unpunished which means that rape continues to be used as a weapon of war” (Chowdhry).

She believes that this anti-memorial would duly memorialize the victims of mass rapes with dignity. Also, the euphemistic erasure of such a mass gendered violence and the silence associated with it is defied by the twice-life-sized image of a naked female's lower body. In cases of celebratory memorials, only socially and culturally accepted figures find their place in the public. Whereas in this anti-memorial, cultural sanitization and censorship are defied by the visuals of female genitalia.

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Further, Chowdhry has made use of Screen memory, a term coined by the Austrian Psychologist, Sigmund Freud as an appropriate structure to depict ethnoreligious violence. The American Psychological Association's Handbook of Clinical Psychology defines screen memory as, "a memory of a childhood experience, usually trivial in nature, that unconsciously serves the purpose of concealing or screening out, or is a conflation of, an associated experience of a more significant and perhaps traumatic nature. Also called cover memory or replacement memory" (943).

Playing swing, hopscotch or jumping rope is assumed to be a safe motif as visuals of rape can trigger unpleasant experiences for sensitive spectators. In this anti-memorial, references to trauma and sexual violence are subtly depicted, but sufficient to make the spectators comprehend the profundity of the experiences. Moreover, the plight of these traumatised women has never found articulation in the monuments or in the state-invested museum devoted to Partition, located in Amritsar. They archived only the optimistic dimensions of partition and the experiences of these women have gone invisible. They have showcased refugee artefacts, arts and archival materials. Even the oral history section of the website contains testimonials where the victims talk about the fraternal bond between the Hindus and Muslims despite religious disparities. But the anti-memorial erected by Pritika Chowdhry challenges the official version of the Partition by foregrounding the acts of violence committed against women.

*Queering Mother India: History is a Woman's Body* is another anti-memorial by Pritika Chowdhry which was installed in 2007 and displays the mutilated, twice-life-sized female body of Mother India. It is pivotal as the complicated collective memory of Partition is heavily gendered. India is portrayed as "Mother India," therefore it is gendered feminine as appropriated to the Hindu nationalist and patriarchal ideology. The stereotyped visual of India as a female constitutes a serene woman with a superfluity of motherhood in her. Hypermasculine identity is enforced upon Pakistan thereby branding it aggressively. The feminine-gendered nation is thus jeopardised and subjected to gruesome sexual violence and misogyny of ethnonationalism. Parts of the female body are scattered across the installed space and a line of clay runs in the middle of the installation. The line signifies the Radcliffe line symbolic of the Partition and how the political catastrophe fragmented not only the nations but also the women's bodies of both nations.

Part of the project's title, *History is a Woman's Body*, is inspired by a chapter from Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* which is a personal chronicle of partition involving oral histories and testimonies. The Part II of the chapter titled, *History is a Woman's Body* explicates the Central Recovery Operation which involved the rescue of abducted women on both sides of the boundary. The complexities involved in this rescue operation were tremendous as some women protested to return to India as they formed relationships with their abductors. Some families exhibited reluctance to accept their women

back into their families. The Partition has complicated and traumatised the lives of women so much that it is almost impossible to believe that they wanted to continue living with their perpetrators.

“Why then should this assault be any different? Simply because the man belonged to a different religion? 'Why should I return,' said an abducted woman, 'Why are you particular to take me to India? What is left in me now of religion or chastity?’” (Butalia 147-48).

Though the Partition riots ripped apart the lives of thousands of women, there aren't any memorials in India or Pakistan to commemorate or acknowledge the sexual violence. The silence surrounding this gendered violence continues to haunt the public discourse of both nations. Thousands of women committed suicide, millions were abducted, and many were slaughtered by the men of their own families to sustain the honour of their families. The tenuous installation of the anti-memorial attempts to do the same through the visuals of scattered body parts of Mother India. The troubling ideology that the country is gendered feminine while the women of the nation are subjected to bouts of extreme violence is problematic. Chowdhry's installation thus attempts to defy the one-sided, official narrative of the Mother archetype using unsettling images of shattered limbs. The invisibility of their plights is emblematised through the placing of larger-than-life-sized clay feet signifying their incomplete traces.

This paper has summarised the underlying power distinction between the functions of memory and its reification through memorialization. Collective memory can either reinforce existing power structures, strengthen silent obedience to history's inertia or build empathy to encourage common understanding and inspire reconciliatory and revolutionary action. Thus, memorials and anti-memorials are instruments used to shape public opinion toward a certain political goal.

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