

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Representation of Violence and Trauma in Fictions on Partition

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### ABSTRACT

Negotiating the violence and its accompanying trauma generated by Partition has always been a momentous task. It was so vast, unexpected, and without precedent that it posed serious problems of interpretation at the social level. Partition was accompanied by such an unprecedented spurt of bestiality that it left the contemporary literary world dazed. However, the fictional narratives of Partition do exist, breaking the silence that veils the calamitous social and political reality and empathising with those who have suffered terribly. These texts do not act as passive reflectors of social reality but active components of an alternative discourse that resolutely strives to rise above sectarianism and hatred. Literary texts play an important role in filling gaps in historiography and in interrogating the logic of the nation-states that emerged after Partition.

**Keywords:** violence; trauma; bestiality; social reality; nation-state

## **FULL PAPER**

### **Introduction**

The partition of India has been a moment of unforgettable trauma for millions of people in the sub-continent. Murder and mutilation of human bodies on a gigantic scale, displacement of millions from their homes and hearths and destruction of properties characterised the Partition. This gruesome reality has been registered through memoirs, historical records, and works of literature. Negotiating the trauma generated by Partition has always been a momentous task. The unprecedented bloodletting that India witnessed in the months leading up to Partition and thereafter has baffled historians as well as creative artists. It was so vast, unexpected, and without precedent that it posed serious problems of interpretation at the social level. However, the body of literature dealing with the violence that engulfed a vast tract of the subcontinent during Partition tries to capture the traumatic experiences of people caught in the vortex of violence. However, there is no denying the fact that Partition was accompanied by such an unprecedented spurt of bestiality that it left the contemporary literary world dazed. Witnessing a traumatic event may not immediately translate into narrating it in any form, even if the people involved are highly creative. The anxiety about the ethical and political consequences of telling often discourages creative artists from talking about violence and suffering.

Fictional texts that represent violence and suffering engage with it in particular ways. Judith Hermann, in her classic *Trauma and Recovery*, emphasises the impossibility of remaining neutral:

To study psychological trauma means bearing witness to horrible events. When the events are natural disasters of ‘acts of God’, those who bear witness sympathise readily with the victim. However, when the traumatic events are of human design, those who bear witness are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator. It is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict. The bystander is forced to take sides (Herman 7).

There is no doubt that the socio-political convulsions during Partition were unfathomable to many a creative artist. The events happening all around them appeared to be meaningless. While in Bengal, several literary works focused on the man-made famine in 1943, which claimed at least three million lives, similar literary responses were found wanting in the aftermath of Partition. Perhaps they were hesitant to ‘take sides’ or got perplexed by such a violent turn of events. In the realm of Hindi and Urdu literature, too, except for Saadat Hossain Manto and Kishan

Chander, the Partition did not evoke immediate literary response as the experiences were too numbing to find expression in words. Later, as the authors started shedding their 'emotional baggage' (Bhalla 161), the reality of Partition was refracted through the prism of creativity in several ways.

Despite the risk of misinterpretation by readers and the aggravation of the problem one actually wants to mitigate, fictional narratives of violence do exist, breaking the silence that veils the calamitous social and political reality and empathising with those who have suffered terribly. These literary texts not only represent the sufferings of fellow human beings but also give voice to those who wish to end atrocities and suffering. Therefore, these texts do not act only as passive reflectors of social reality but as active components of an alternative cultural practice that resolutely strives to rise above sectarianism and hatred. Literary texts play an important role in filling gaps in historiography and in interrogating the parochial versions of the nation-states that emerged after Partition.

### **Reading Partition Literature as Narrative Testimonial**

As Martina Kopf observes, art can be viewed as a form of empathic witnessing (Kopf 1). It can restore meaning where it had been destroyed; integrate suppressed and painful experience into collective memory, and give victims of violence voice, agency and dignity. Irene Kacandes, in her article 'Narrative witnessing as Memory Work', which integrates a model originally developed in trauma therapy into her reading of a short novel, *A Jewish Mother* by Gertrud Kolmar, comments:

... The relief of traumatic symptoms [...] seems to require the creation of some inherent narrative about the event or events that inflicted the trauma; this process is sometimes referred to as the translation of traumatic memory into narrative memory" (Kacandes 55).

The wordless anguish, confusion, and numbness that surround the Partition can only find meaningful articulation through such narrative memory, where the fiction-writer bears witness to the socio-political turbulence that altered the pattern of existence for millions of people. Literature can initiate a process of inter-communal and inter-personal communication and provide a healing touch to the wound that Partition inflicted.

Kali Tal, a major literary critic in her seminal work, *World of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, observes, 'Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity' (Tal). In light of this remark, the fictional representations of Partition can be viewed as important cultural artefacts that unveil

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the gruesome reality of Partition to everyone's view and help us rethink the politics of communal identity and its disastrous impact on personal and collective existence.

There has always remained a constant anxiety about the possibility and the desirability of retrieving traumatic experiences from the past through literary devices. In her celebrated work *Language and Body: Transactions in the construction of Pain*, Veena Das asks, 'Could that which died be named, acknowledged and mourned? Alternatively, would one be condemned to dwell alone and nameless in the 'ruins of mourning', as Lawrence Langer calls them.' (Das 69) Thereafter, she maintains, '...some realities need to be fictionalised before they are apprehended' (Das 69). Literary works on the Partition document and remember the violence, and give a voice to the victims.

### **Narrating the Sectarian Carnage**

Khuswant Singh's novel *Train to Pakistan* demonstrates how communal violence turned the world upside down for peace-loving rural folks who lived in amity and fellow feeling for centuries. The setting of the novel is Mano Majra, one of the 'remaining oases of peace', lost in the remote reaches of the frontier (Singh 69). The rhythm of life in Mano Majra changed abruptly when a ghost train arrived, its compartments full of corpses. The author comments:

The village was still in a deathly silence. No one asked anyone else what the odour was. They all knew they had known it all the time. The answer was implicit in the fact that the train had come from Pakistan. That evening, for the first time in the memory of Mano Majra, Imam Baksh's sonorous cries did not rise to the heavens to proclaim the glory of God. (Singh 10)

The novelist presents the role of vicious propaganda as an important component of the politics of communal mobilisation in *A Train to Pakistan*. After the evacuation of Muslims from the village by the district administration, the existing Hindu and Sikh population of the small village easily fell prey to the perfidious logic of retributive violence. They prepare to attack a Pakistan-bound train scheduled to pass through Mano Majra. However, the village rogue Juggat Singh, to ensure a safe passage for his beloved Nooran, sacrifices his life and allows the train to reach its destination in Pakistan unharmed.

*Tamas*, a novel by Bhishm Sahani, presents an archetypal case of communal carnage that took place in the wake of the defilement of a mosque. The first episode of the novel depicts the killing of a pig by Nathu, a tanner commissioned by Murad Ali, a shrewd man, to fulfil the veterinary doctor's requirement. It was actually a well-crafted stratagem to incite sectarian passions. Communal tension mounts after a

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dead pig was found lying on the steps of the local mosque. Soon, the rumour of a slaughtered cow found in the compound of a local Hindu Dharmasala starts doing the rounds. The small town rapidly transforms into a battleground.

The novel depicts how communal violence was triggered by religious fanatics and how people, including teenagers, were indoctrinated by them. The author observes detachedly how mistrust and prejudice pervaded the atmosphere, and efforts to reconcile the warring groups went in vain. When Mir Dad, a communist volunteer, tries to convince the local Muslims about the role of the British Raj in widening the communal divide for the sake of consolidating their regime, one of them says:

The angrez has done us no wrong. It is the age-old enmity between the Hindu and the Muslim. A Kafir is a kafir. As long as he does not profess the right religion, he will remain our enemy. To kill a kafir brings merit. (Sahni 126)

Similarly, Sikhs consider the present conflict with the Muslims as a link in the historic chain of events and identify themselves with their ancestors who fought against their Muslim enemies centuries back. The long history of living side by side for centuries and sharing traditions receded into oblivion in the face of a tremendous upsurge of hatred.

Bapsi Sidhwa, the noted Pakistani novelist, in her famous novel *Ice Candy Man*, probes into the genesis of the violence that took a mass form in Punjab. The contemporary political situation affects the activities and behaviour of the people around Lenny, an eight-year-old lame Parsee girl child. Lenny observes: It is sudden. One day, everybody is themselves, and the next day, they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian. People shrink, dwindle into symbols. (Sidhwa 93)

The scenes of violence depicted in the novel are a chilling revelation of human predicament and brutalisation caused by communal antagonism. In those turbulent days, the streets of Lahore were under the control of a bloodthirsty mob of religious fanatics. Little Lenny, the narrator of *Ice-Candy-Man*, observes: 'The terror the mob generates is palpable – like an evil, paralysing spell. The terrible procession, like a sluggish river, flows beneath us. Every short while, a group of men, like a whirling eddy, stalls – and like the widening circle of a treacherous eddy dissolving in the mainstream, leaves in its centre the pulpy red flotsam of a mangled body'(Sidhwa 135)

The cosmopolitan city of Lahore, depicted in *Ice-Candy-Man*, similarly lost its multi-ethnic character in the wake of communal strife. Even before the riots started, communal propaganda vitiated the atmosphere to such an extent that even in parks,

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children from different communities were not allowed to mix freely among themselves. However, after the ethnic cleansing was over, Lahore almost looked like any other city. Bereft of 'coloured turbans, hairy bodies of Sikhs and 'Hindus in dhotis, with bodhis it lost its vibrant multi – cultural character' (Sidhwa 175).

Manik Bandyopadhyay, the celebrated Bengali novelist and short-story writer, aesthetically recreates the turbulent days of the worst period of communal violence in the history of Kolkata in his novel *Swadhinatar Swad* (The Taste of Freedom). The infamous communal slaughter of 1946 made the situation unbearable as human cruelty and sadism reached a crescendo. In *Swadhinatar Swad* Manik Bandyopadhyay refers to the contemporary socio-political scenario and its impact on the human psyche:

The unnatural death on the streets since the days of the Japanese bombings, famine, protest movements, police firing, and strife have stirred the well-protected minds of human beings in the four walls of existence. Riots have made it intolerable. Day after day, there has been no respite, no moment of peace (Bandyopadhyay 272).

Deliberating on the nature of communal massacres in 1946 in Kolkata, Dr Suranjan Das explains, 'What...most clearly distinguishes the 1946 violence from earlier outbreaks was its highly organised nature and direct links with institutional politics' (Das, *Communal Riots* 17). In *Swadhinatar Swad*, the author highlights the nexus among the colonial administration, the underworld, and organised politics. While the British police remained mute spectators, politicians representing the Congress and the Muslim League provided overt or covert support to the hoodlums who ruled the city for months.

*Swadhinatar Swad* reveals how the relationship between friends is adversely affected by communal antagonism. Mansur, the poet and Girin are old friends. Mansur narrowly escapes death after being attacked by an irate Hindu mob. Though Girin saves him from the disaster, he grows suspicious of Girin's motives and accuses him of a murderous conspiracy against him. Though they later renew their friendship, the incident proves how old relationships can become fragile under the destabilising impact of sustained communal propaganda and internecine violence.

### **Exploring the Psyche of the Perpetrator**

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Bhishm Sahni explores the psychology of individual perpetrators of violence. Mindless violence and intense communal propaganda during communal riots bred irrationality even among those who were known for their hospitality and non-communal mindset. Shahnawaz in *Tamas* is one such character. He is an influential businessman who rescues his Hindu friends during communal carnage. His friend Raghunath and his wife have so much faith in him that they entrust him with the task of bringing jewellery boxes from their ancestral house to the bungalow where they have taken refuge. In the afternoon, Raghunath's wife gets the jewel box intact from Shahnawaz and thanks him for his kindness and assistance in their hour of need. In the meantime, Shahnawaz has committed a grotesque crime. After gazing at the congregation of mourners at a local mosque near Raghunath's house, Shahnawaz's mind goes 'into a crazy whirl' (Sahni 126). He suddenly kicks Milkhi, the Sikh caretaker of Raghunath's house, in the back. The man's head is battered against the wall as he comes downstairs, and he dies instantly. The author wonders:

What had set it off? Was it the sight of Milkhi's centipede-like tuft, or was it the thought of the congregation in the mosque? Or was it what he had been seeing and hearing for the past three days finally taking its toll? (Sahni 126)

Sustained communal propaganda took its toll on the individuals as they grew extremely distrustful of the 'other' community and were gripped by an irrational fear of the 'other'. There is a spine-chilling episode in *Tamas*, which depicts the cold-blooded killing of an old Muslim peddler at the hands of a teenager. A critic has observed that in communal pogroms, followers of one religion consider those outside it as being 'beyond the pale'. In a sense, this reduces the 'humanity' of the 'infidels', making it easier to perpetrate violence against them. (Shaheeda 195). Literary works that deal with the Partition try to explore the milieu in which such gruesome violence got legitimacy and social sanction.

Mohan Rakesh's Hindi story *Malbe Ka Malik (Proprietor of the Debris)* is unique in its treatment of a murderer's psyche when he confronts the aged and inconsolable father of the victim. Ghani Sheikh, unaware of the fact that the wrestler Rakha had killed his son and his family members, laments in front of him and wonders how his son's family could be wiped out despite the mighty presence of Rakha in the locality. Ghani Sheikh's emotional outpourings and reiteration of his belief in Rakha's ability to save others' lives, particularly those who were vulnerable, make the hard-hearted wrestler inwardly weak. The heinous crime he committed starts to haunt him, and to proclaim his inward goodness, he, for the first time, narrates his pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi to his associates, instead of talking about gambling tricks. Rakha claimed the rubble that was once Ghani's house as his own,

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and no one, not even a domestic animal, was allowed to stray into it. The rubble remained almost unchanged in the last seven and a half years. However, after Ghani Seikh's arrival, Rakha for the first time feels eeriness as he sits beside the charred heap of brick, wood and mortar. That night, a dog barks incessantly at him, in a symbolic cry of disapproval against his claim of ownership of the debris. Rakha realises the essential bestiality of his action, and the debris reminds him of the mindless destruction he carried out. Being a murderer, what else can he claim to be his own? His pride in being the proprietor of the debris vanishes like a bubble.

### **Asserting the Humane**

Though Partition resulted in unprecedented bloodshed, turning neighbours into murderers, there were many instances of fellow-felling and sacrificial gestures even in those turbulent times. These moments of compassion and fellow-feeling have been captured in literary narratives. The predicament of Harnam Singh and his wife, depicted in *Tamas*, was similar to that of thousands of others wandering the countryside in search of shelter. However, their experience differs from that of many others, as an old Muslim woman shelters them. She hides them in a small attic. Harnam Singh recognises her husband, who enters the house with a locked trunk looted from Harnam's small shop. Ehsan Ali feels embarrassed and gropes for words as Harnam offers to hand over the keys. It is Ehsan Ali's son Ramzana who has led the attack on Harnam Singh's shop. Even Ramzana, hesitant to attack the older man, leaves his house hurriedly. The author comments, 'It is one thing to kill a Kafir and quite another to kill a man with whom one is familiar and who is also staying under one's roof'. (Sahni 184) Harnam Singh and his wife get a fresh lease of life in Ehsan Ali's household. Rajo, Ehsan Ali's wife, escorts them to the end of the village and hands them two ornaments she finds in their trunk.

*Shada Ghora (The White Horse)*, a Bengali short story by Ramesh Chandra Sen, is an absorbing story about communal violence during the 1946 riot in Calcutta. It shows how a horse became prey to a bloodbath in those turbulent days. The horse, which accidentally entered a locality in Calcutta, is treated as a symbol of peace and amity. It infuses the local people, who have endured unprecedented brutality and insecurity, with a sense of vitality and joy. However, the horse that restores communal amity in the terror-stricken locality succumbs to bullets fired by the army men. At the time of its poignant death, the horse again unites the local people and helps them shed their mutual hatred.

### **Conclusion**

As Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin observed, ‘The scale and ferocity of the violence [during Partition]... continue to horrify us even today, virtually paralysing any effort to comprehend its meaning fully’ (Menon and Bhasin 38). It has not been possible to evolve any consensus regarding the causes of Partition. However, studies across different disciplines have contributed substantially to understanding this complex event. In literature, more than anywhere else, the horrors of Partition are recorded and narrated from multiple perspectives. The novelists and short story-writers, each with their sensibility and power of using words, give an account of the mayhem, its incomprehensibility and the bewilderment into which it plunged common people. Fictional texts serve as narrative testimonials to the wordless anguish of millions of sufferers and initiate a process of inter-communal and inter-personal sharing. Transcending the barrier of bigotry, these works tie the sufferers across religious denominations in the common bond of humanity. Krishna Sobti has rightly asserted, ‘Fiction about the partition of India and Pakistan has made an attempt despite the enormity of the horror it describes, to preserve essential human values.’ (Sobti 138)

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