

Literature as empathetic witnessing: Reading violence in selected texts of Partition Literature

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***Abstract:** Partition of India has been a moment of unforgettable trauma for millions of people. Gruesome violence, mass exodus of millions of people and destruction of properties characterized Partition. Negotiating the trauma generated by Partition has always been a momentous task for historians and creative artists. It was so vast, unexpected and unprecedented that it posed serious problems of interpretation. Yet the body of literature dealing with the violence during Partition tries to capture the traumatic experiences of people in different ways. These fictional narratives break the silence that veiled the calamitous social and political reality of Partition and empathize with them who have suffered terribly. These texts are not passive reflectors of social reality. Rather these narratives can be considered as forms of empathetic witnessing. These texts offer an alternative discourse that resolutely strives to rise above sectarianism and hatred. This paper seeks to focus on selected English and Bengali texts that try to grapple with the calamity that accompanied the dismemberment of India in 1947 from multiple perspectives and help us understand the human tragedy of Partition in a nuanced way.*

***Key Words:** Partition, Violence, Trauma, Empathetic Witnessing, Alternative Discourse*

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Introduction

India's Partition has been a moment of unforgettable trauma for millions of people in the sub-continent. The decision to divide the sub-continent into two sovereign states sparked human calamities that have few parallels in history. Murder and mutilation of human bodies on a gigantic scale, displacement of millions from their homes and hearths and destruction of properties characterized Partition. The riots and pogroms that preceded and followed Partition claimed at least one million lives and rendered more than fifteen millions homeless within a few months. This gruesome reality has been registered through memoirs, historical records as well as works of literature. Though historical documents provide necessary factual details, the fictions and plays on Partition delineate a graphic picture of communal carnage and explore the milieu in which such gruesome violence erupted.

Theoretical Framework for understanding the literary representation of violence

Negotiating the trauma generated by Partition has always been a momentous task. It was so vast, unexpected and without any precedence that it posed serious problems of interpretation at social levels. Yet 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. 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 narration of the said event in some form, even if the persons involved are highly creative. The anxiety about the ethical and political consequences of telling often discourages the creative artists to talk about violence and suffering.

Fictional texts that represent violence and suffering are involved in it in a specific way. Judith Hermann in her classic *Trauma and Recovery* emphasizes the impossibility to remain 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 sympathize readily with the victim. But 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.¹

The socio-political convulsions during Partition was unfathomable to many a creative artist as 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 Hasan Manto and Kishen Chander, the Partition did not evoke immediate literary response as the experiences were too benumbing to find expression in words. Later as the authors started shedding their ‘emotional baggage’², the reality of Partition was refracted through the prism of creativity in several ways.

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? Or would one be condemned to dwell alone and nameless in the ‘ruins of mourning,’ as Lawrence Langer calls them.’³ Then, she observes, ‘...some realities need to be fictionalized before they are apprehended’⁴.

Reading Partition literature as narrative testimonial

As Martina Kopf observes, art can be viewed as a form of empathetic witnessing.⁵ It can restore meaning where it had been destroyed; integrate suppressed and painful experience into collective memory and gives 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 kind of 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’⁶.

The wordless anguish, confusion and numbness that surround the Partition can only find its 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 observes in her seminal work, *World of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, ‘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’⁷.

Despite the risk of misinterpretation by the readers and the aggravation of the problem that one actually wants to mitigate, the fictional narratives of violence do exist, breaking the silence that veil the calamitous social and political reality and empathizing

with them who have suffered terribly. Literary texts show the link between sustained sectarian propaganda and outburst of hatred. The authors explore the multi-layered experiences of people in those days and their ways of negotiating with them. These literary texts do not only represent sufferings of fellow human beings but also give voice to those who wish to put an end to atrocities and suffering. Therefore, these texts do not act only as passive reflectors of social reality but active components of an alternative cultural practice that resolutely strives to rise above sectarianism and hatred.

Narrating the moment of sectarian carnage: unprecedented upheavals

A. Retributive violence

Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, one of the earliest literary responses to the agony of Partition, demonstrates how communal violence turned the world upside down for peace-loving rural folks who lived side by side for centuries. The setting of the novel is Mano Majra, an idyllic village, an oasis of peace lost in the remote reaches of the border, inhabited by both the Sikhs and Muslims. The author directly refers to the instances of mass-murder during and after Partition and comments, 'The fact is, both sides killed'⁸.

The village is stilled into deathly silence when a ghost train arrived there with compartments full of corpses. Ghost trains kept coming to Mono Majra and the turbid water of Sutlej brought bloated carcasses of human beings and cattle. Fanatical outsiders whipped up communal passion in Mano Majra, which never witnessed any sort of communal conflict. A teenager, depicted by the novelist as the leader of the refugees, incites the local Sikhs with his impassioned rhetoric and pleads for taking revenge against the Muslims and the preparation for retributive violence begins in Mano Majra.

The same logic of retributive violence can be heard in the statement of the popsicle man in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy-Man*. The arrival of a train full of dead bodies of Muslim men and women from Gurudaspur hardened many young men like the Popsicle man.

Bhism Sahni's masterpiece *Tamas* starts with the slaying of a pig whose carcass is thrown into the premises of a mosque to start communal riot in a city in North West Frontier Provinces. Soon a cow's head is found stuck in the fences of a temple. Vultures start flying in the sky over the small provincial city as blood flows down the streets. Civil War breaks out in the countryside, too. Here the scene of violence is Syyedpur, a village inhabited by both Sikhs and Muslims and Muslims enjoy a numerical superiority. Both these communities have been nurturing prejudices against each other, which come to surface in this communally charged atmosphere. When Mir Dad, a communist volunteer tries to convince the local Muslims about the role of 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's 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.⁹

Similarly, Sikhs are charged with frenzied religious passions as they congregate in the Gurdwara to make elaborate action plans to resist the perceived threat from the local Muslims. They do not treat the present crisis as a sudden disaster caused by contemporary socio-political convulsion beyond their control. Instead, they 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 tremendous upsurge of hatred.

Another gruesome aspect of Partition is that it resulted in unprecedented assault on women. They were subjected to physical violence of different sorts – murder, rape, molestation, abduction and forced evacuation from home – throughout the Indian subcontinent. Women were considered as ‘living boundary markers of collectivity’¹⁰. Therefore, women of the ‘other’ community were targeted as physical control over the female body was construed as metaphorical dominance over the rival community. On the other hand, groups brutalized their own women because they thought that it was the best way of saving their ‘honour’. As women represented the home, the ‘sacred’ private space, usurpation of their bodies symbolized the invasion of the inner sphere of a community. During inter-communal conflict, therefore, women were treated as symbolic as well as material battlefields. Children also suffered terribly, but their voices are seldom heard, except in some literary works like *Ice Candy Man*.

B. Organized nature of violence

Eminent Bengali author Manik Bandyopadhyay imaginatively recreates the turbulent days during 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. Several incidents, depicted in *Swadhinatar Swad*, expose the organized nature of communal mobilization. Subodh Singh and Yasin, divided by religion and united by their lust for profit and power, join hands to stoke the communal fire. Failing to mobilize the slum-dwellers on communal lines, a desperate attempt is made by killing a good, old woman fondly called ‘Nani’ by all. Though the communal situation worsens for the time being, the poor slum-dwellers restrain themselves by sensing foul play behind the murder of the aged woman.

Bhism Sahani's masterpiece, *Tamas (The Darkness)* exposes the politics of hatred propagated by religious leaders like Vanprasthji or the Pir of Golra Sharif who played a vicious role in widening the communal divide and shaping public opinion in our country in the years leading up to Partition. Bhism Sahni's keen perception of social reality as well as thorough knowledge about the vicious strategy of communal forces is reflected through his portrayal of youth as soft targets of communal propaganda. Ranvir, a fifteen year old boy is picked up by Master Devbrat, the leader of Youth Samaj, a sectarian outfit, for 'initiation' into his organization.

There is a spine-chilling episode in *Tamas*, which depicts cold blooded killing of an old Muslim peddler in the hands of a teenager. This episode illustrates the murderous activities of Ranvir and his gangs who like predators prepare to swoop on their target at the right moment. It is particularly shocking that the boys target their Muslim neighbours as potential targets. After failing to do so they turn their attention towards a feeble old perfume-seller who comes to sell his wares in the small town during the days of intense communal strife. When the old perfume seller spots these young boys behind him he advises them to go indoors in that troubled time. He cannot even imagine that those boys would eventually turn out to be his killers. The conversation between the old peddler and young boy is a chilling reminder of the deep civilization crisis that India faced in those days. While the old man shows affection and civility, the teenager, brainwashed by fanatic propaganda, kills him brutally.

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'. Apart from this, brutalization of consciousness on a mass scale had a profound impact on people. Baldev Singh, one of the Sikh characters in *Tamas*, commits mindless violence when without verifying the rumour about the murder of his mother, by the 'Turks' he gets uncontrollably agitated and kills a harmless old Muslim neighbour.

The colonial authority has been accused by several characters in different literary texts for its complicity in the violence. *Swadhinatar Swad* narrates how military trucks arrive only after several people are killed, slums are set ablaze and poor people turn homeless. Richard, the British Deputy-Commissioner in *Tamas* blatantly tells his wife, 'Darling, the rulers don't look for similarities among the ruled. They are only interested in finding out what can keep them apart.'¹¹ He delays to take measures to take action against the fanatics and lets the communal conflagration to burn the city and nearby villages in the fire of mutual hatred.

C. Transformation of man into symbols

Ice-Candy-Man, an English novel by Bapsi Sidhwa, the noted Pakistani novelist, probes into the genesis of the violence that took a mass form in Punjab. It explores the mindset of a group of people whose friendship got a rude jolt during the days of Partition. The child narrator Lenny hears the members of the group—Ayah, Masseur, Govt. House Gardener, Butcher and the Popsicle man—talk about Partition. Their conversation reveals the communal passions of the speakers. The contemporary political situation affects the activities and behavior of the people around Lenny. Lenny observes:

It is sudden. One day everybody is themselves and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. People shrink, dwindle into symbol. Ayah is no longer just my all-encompassing Ayah – she is also a token a Hindu. Carried away by a renewed devotional fervour she expends a small fortune in jogs–sticks, flowers and sweets on the gods and goddesses in the temple. Imam Din and Yousuf, turning into religious zealots, warn Mother they will take Friday afternoon off for the Jumha prayers. Crammed into a narrow religious slot they too are diminished as are Jinnah and Iqbal, Ice-Candy-Man and Masseur¹².

Every single individual was reduced to a symbol, denoting particular religious faith, made visible by particular caste/ religious marks or choice of attire. However, in midst of the all-encompassing darkness there were several incidents when common people rose above sectarian feelings and took personal risk to save their fellow countrymen from the fury of the mob.

D. Exploration of the psyche of the perpetrator

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 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'¹³. 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? ¹⁴

It is not possible to detect the exact motive that had driven Shahnawaz crazy and bloodthirsty. Perhaps there was, as has been hinted by the author, a curious combination of different factors that generated violent passions.

However, it is rather difficult to address the question of alchemy. A critic has observed that in communal pogrom 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'.¹⁵ Literary works that deal with Partition try to explore the rupture caused by this event in its totality. The factors that might have contributed to the parting of the ways between communities included sustained communal propaganda, inequalities at the economic and social levels and the direct involvement of the colonial rulers in the perpetuation of communal hostilities.

Asserting the essential humanity

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. Memories of many Partition victims testify to the exceptional and exemplary acts of courage enacted by many people to stem the tide of violence.

That the newly formed sense of doubt, betrayal and bitterness is unable to sever the age-old bond between the local Sikhs and their Muslim tenants completely is emphasized in *A Train to Pakistan*. The discussion in Gurdwara about the fate of Muslims in Mano Majra reveals the complex interplay of emotion, fellow feeling and expediency. The author presents individual examples of sanity and generosity to express his faith in redemption of human nature. Meet Singh, the local Sikh priest, tries hard to dissuade the armed Sikh youth from attacking the Pakistan-bound train. Despite the meticulousness and precision of the plan, it failed. The Military or the police did not have any role to foil it. It was Jugga, the 'budmash', who in order to save his beloved Nooran, foiled the murderous plan and sacrificed his life. The author valorizes the inter-communal love of Jugga and Nooran and projects it as the only redemptive force in the midst of mindless violence. Jugga's sacrifice is a silver lining to the all-pervading gloom that hovered above India. In spite of being a 'confirmed ruffian' he saved the lives of thousands of Muslims in a thrilling climax. A common man like Jugga is invested with tragic dignity at the end of the novel. His violent death also exposes the brutal attitude of the fundamentalists who do not hesitate to kill a co-religionist as he foiled their loathsome plan to massacre members of the 'other' community. Khuswant Singh's

approach is positive and his novel ends with a note of optimism and faith in basic human values.

Bhism Sahni's *Tamas* relates the experiences of an aged Sikh couple who had to flee their home in the wake of communal violence and was given shelter in a Muslim family. Rajo, an old Muslim lady hides them in a small attic. Harnam Singh, the Sikh shopkeeper, recognizes Rajo's husband Ehsan Ali, who enters the house with a locked trunk looted from his small shop. It is Ehsan Ali's son Ramzana who has led the attack on Harnam Singh's shop. Though he himself supports this looting and arson as a fitting rebuff to what the 'kafirs have done in the city'¹⁶ he allows the old Sikh couple to stay at his house for a night. Even Ramzana finds himself in an awkward situation and leaves the spot 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 of under one's roof".¹⁷ Harnam Singh and his wife get fresh lease of life in Ehsan Ali's household. Rajo displays exemplary courage and compassion. She escorts them till the end of the village and hands them over two ornaments which she finds in their trunk.

Tamas also narrates the courageous attempts by some political workers to resist the onrush of communal frenzy with fortitude and equipoise. Bakshiji, the Veteran Congress Leader tries his level best to restore peace, amity and order in the riot-hit town. He removes the pig's carcass, from the stairs of the mosque in order to diffuse communal tension. Though his sincerest efforts are foiled by communalists of both communities Bakshiji towers above the other veteran political leaders of the provincial town as a genuine well-wisher of the common people. However, Bhism Sahni presents Devdutt, an untiring and fearless Communist activist as the most passionate opponent of communal ideology. In spite of being the leader of a tiny political outfit, he employs his cadres to foil the attempts of communal forces to create divisions among people in the name of religion. He sends Jagdish, one of his trusted aides to the workers' colony at Ratta to maintain solidarity among the workers and to prevent infiltration of communal politics. Mir Dad and Sohan Singh, two other comrades of Devdutt, go to Sayyedpur to curb rising communal tension. While Mir Dad tries to convince the Muslims, Sohan Singh makes sincere efforts to dissuade Sikhs from arming themselves to the teeth. All these young and courageous men have been conscious of the enormity of the task they have undertaken and the risk involved. Though Mir Dad and Devdutt lose their lives in this fight against communal politics, their sacrifices are not futile as they represent that strand of political activism that believes in basic humanity and offers an alternative in midst of rising hatred and animosity.

Conclusion:

Partition is like a festering wound. It still serves as a defining moment when India's social fabric, richly woven by shared heritage was violently ripped apart by communal conflict. The literary texts serve as a witness to the communal carnage and offer a penetrating insight into the human tragedy of Partition. Moreover, these works make the readers aware about the destructive potential of the raw communal passions that still simmer beneath the surface of our identities and offer a caveat about the disastrous consequences of communal politics that continue to plague our society.

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