

Communal Violence as Social Problem: Literary Perspectives with Special Reference to the Partition of India



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Abstract

After Independence with partition, violence remains to be a major political tool for settling disputes in Indian society. Communal ideologies still exercise their hold on the collective imagination, leading to unprecedented instances of violence. This makes us to feel that the lessons of partition are not over.

The most popular and common perceptions on Partition have tried to look into the causes for the partition of India, the development of separatism under Jinnah and the violence that occurred during partition. Attempts were also made to establish who were to be blamed and how far communal thinking had made in roads into secular organizations and sensibilities. Some works have also tried to examine the roles of Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, Azad, Patel, and others in the partition. A substantial body of literature also exists on the manner in which the boundaries were drawn between India and Pakistan, on the Eastern and Western fronts alike. There has been much speculation about the role of the British in hastening the partition, and Gandhi's inability to prevent it. Whatever may be the causes of the partition, the brute facts cannot be belied: down to the present day, the partition remains the single largest episode of violence in Modern history.

The proposed paper tries to explore the literary and critical responses to the traumatic experiences of partition violence. It seeks to view violence in different ways with special reference to the partition of India and the literary responses in a few selected novels to it in order to analyze communal violence as a social problem in India.

Keywords: Community, Violence, Partition of India, Women and Children, Displacement, Trauma, Literature.

Introduction

India was operated upon by such clumsy hands and blunt knives that thousands of arteries were left open. Rivers of blood flowed and no one had the strength left to stitch the wounds.... (Ismat Chughtai, in her short story Roots)

Why are the memories of Partition violence important today, when they are bitter, sensitive and painful? Remembering the past is helpful to plan our future. Urvashi Butalia observes, "Memory is a complex thing, however remembering Partition does not mean only recalling the violence of the time. For every story of violence and enmity, there is a story of friendship and love, and it is as important to recall those as it is to look at stories of violence² The present atmosphere in the Indian subcontinent is tense owing to a series of violent incidents, which has reminded writers of the Partition violence. It is our past that directs us to our future, and therefore it is essential to deal with the questions of the use and abuse of the past in order to work towards the kind of future we want. Hence, to have a peaceful future, we need to understand the violent past.

Preamble

The aim of this research paper is to examine how communal violence as a social problem is emerging in post independent India with the violence of partition in its backdrop. Whereas the scholarships which were done so far on Partition focus on the political maneuverings of Partition and the violence that accompanied it, the proposed research undertakes to examine and analyze how communal violence is emerging in the past few decades. The division of British India on communal lines signaled a unique

rupture within the subcontinent where violence became the defining agent of history.

Objectives of the Study

The paper aspires to find out, with reference to the chosen works, the trauma of violence during Partition and its shadows in the decades after Partition; the impact of the critical events that happened in the decades after Partition on the process of the making of the nation; the evolution of the nation along with the attempts to forget those painful moments of Partition violence; memory as the significant factor in reshaping the psyche of the individuals concerned; religion, gender and identity in face of violence; and, indigenous populations and their relation/response to a segregated nation-space which is under the process of becoming.

Methodology

The paper takes up for analysis not only the writings of a range of theorists, but also draws upon a wide range of scholars from diverse fields such as Gyanendra Pandey, Sudhir Kakar, Suranjan Das, Veena Das, Urvashi Butalia, Suvir Kaul, Alok Bhalla, Ravikant and Tarun.K.Saint, and others, who have analysed the continuing impact of Partition on the national psyche through communal violence. The deployment of these scholars into the readings of the texts has enabled the paper to get a grasp of the problem, in addition to providing rich insights into the texts themselves.

Review of Literature

As a prelude to the discussion, we need to understand the nature of violence in the Indian context. The pre- and post-Partition riots in the Indian subcontinent are often seen as collective violence. As Gyanendra Pandey puts it, "...the singularly violent character of the event stands out" (*Remembering Partition*, 2). "What was achieved through non-violence, brought with it one of the bloodiest upheavals of history" (Chaddah.52). Several lakhs of people were believed to have been killed, large numbers raped and converted, and many millions who were uprooted became refugees³. According to Rafiq Zakaria, far from solving the Hindu-Muslim problem, Partition has bifurcated it, threatening the peace and security in South Asia (173). Even now, the Indian Subcontinent is witnessing the cycle of violence repeatedly, leaving behind victims, painful experiences and shattered memories.

Gyanendra Pandey categorizes violence under three groups (*Remembering Partition* 59). *First*, at a time when the complicity of the state in acts of brutal and apparently meaningless violence is all too well established, the state or state like body directly carries out genocide or massacre⁴. A *second* brand of collective violence that requires notice is the kind witnessed in India in 1992-93, when VHP 'a large organisation' incited mass killings over the Babri Masjid issue⁵. The third category: where people become victims of violence, at a moment of a loss of sanity they start killing each other. It is this kind of violence that was witnessed during the Partition of India in 1947.

Ashgar Ali Engineer identifies some micro and macro factors that are responsible for social

turbulence and violence (*Communalism and Communal Violence in India*.pp.2-10). Macro factors include the class nature of the society, the underdevelopment of the economy and scarcity of resources. The underdevelopment of the economy often results in its uneven development, both community and region wise. This imbalance throws up the problem of communal or regional identity and when the state fails to notice this, there generates enough ground for violence to sprout up. *Micro factors* include local and delicate issues: cow slaughter, playing of music, competition between rival tenders, and competition between two gangs of hoodlums dealing with either in smuggling illicit drugs or similar other anti social activities. There are some other micro factors which lead to well organized instances of violence. To name a few of these: schemes by local industrial magnates to weak trade unions⁶ by raising some communal issues, elections to local bodies or contest over some Assembly or Parliamentary seats etc. Even today, some of these issues are used to whip up communal violence in the society.

The Partition violence has left a permanent imprint in the minds of the people of subcontinent. Communal ideologies still exercise their hold on the collective imagination, leading to unprecedented instances of violence. 1984 saw a pogrom violence at Delhi, resurrecting the trauma of Partition. In 1989, in Bhagalpur in Bihar, hundreds of Muslims were killed in one of India's worst communal riots, followed by the violence in Surat, the post Babri Masjid riots and the recent pogroms of violence in Gujarat, Orissa and Karnataka. These instances take the memories back to Partition violence. As Suvir Kaul puts it: "...for each time Indians are killed in the name of religion, each time a pogrom is orchestrated in our cities, memories of Partition resurface" (*The Partition of Memory*, 3). This makes us to feel that the lessons of Partition are not over.

Women and children have suffered the most during and after Partition. Researches have been made recently regarding women's suffering during Partition⁷ Thousands of women on both sides of the newly formed borders were abducted, raped, forced to convert, forced onto marriage, forced back into what the two states defined as 'their proper homes', torn apart from their families once during Partition by those who abducted them, and again, after Partition, by the state, which tried to 'recover' and 'rehabilitate' them⁸. Untold numbers of women, particularly in Sikh families were killed by their kinsmen⁹ in order to protect them from being converted and perhaps equal numbers of them killed themselves¹⁰. According to Bapsi Sidhwa, "the victories are celebrated on the bodies of women. So, it is not surprising that women became the targets of brutality. [...] they were seen as the receptacles of a man's honour. When women are attacked, it is not they per se who are the targets, but the man to whom they belong. It is humiliating for a man to see his woman being abused before him"¹¹

The holocaust that followed the Partition of India is recorded in sensitive detail by Partition Fiction.¹²

According to Alok Bhalla, Partition fiction records that when refugees arrive at camps set up for them, they understand that far from being participants in "pilgrims' time", they are merely poor players trapped in civil, political and religious nightmares enacted to satisfy the egotism of some and the powerful ambitions of others. (*Partition Dialogues*, pp.4-7).

The short stories that take the theme of Partition follow the novels in a certain sense. As Alok Bhalla points out, contrary to the communal histories, these short stories have more to do with the actualities of human experience in barbaric times than with ideologies. In his Introduction to *Stories about the Partition of India*, Alok Bhalla divides the short stories with the theme of Partition into the following categories: *First*, stories which are communally charged. *Second*, stories of anger and negation. *Third*, stories of lamentation and consolation. *Finally*, stories of the retrieval of memories. These categories reflect the ways in which the writers tried to make sense of the events which were otherwise unimaginable (p.xv). As Krishna Sobti puts it, Partition fiction "has made an attempt, despite the enormity of the horror it describes, to preserve essential human values" (*Partition Dialogues*, 138).

In recent years, the scholarly literature has taken a different turn, becoming at once more nuanced and attentive to considerations previously ignored or minimized. Bapsi Sidhwa links the recent riots in India with the Partition riots. She is of the opinion that the legacy of Partition is still there and it can be seen in what is going on now in India: feelings have become much worse in places like Bombay and Gujarath, where there was little or no rioting at the time of Partition. Muslims did not even move away from there, or very few moved. "Partition is not over, it is going on and on; its problems stay and affect each of our lives"¹³ In his Preface to *The Price of Partition*, Rafiq Zakaria also opines the same: "the old wounds are still with us; they were never completely healed. Every now and again trouble breaks out between Hindus and Muslims, at one place or another and the wounds are ripped open" (p.xiii).

The Chosen Texts

The chosen novels – Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1973), Indira Goswami's *Pages Stained with Blood* (1988), Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* (1993), and M.J.Akbar's *Blood Brothers* (2006) have all been published in the last fifty years, with one novel being selected from each of the decades after the 1960s. The selected novels thus share common contexts and characteristics that define the nation as it evolves into the 21st century with all the baggage that its turbulent communal past has bequeathed to it. In these texts, it is seen that memories of Partition cast long shadows over the evolving fabric of the new nation, contesting its spaces, challenging its borders, and destabilizing its structures.

Sunlight on a Broken Column by Attia Hosain consists of four parts covering a period of about twenty years in the life of Laila, in an orthodox aristocratic Muslim family. In the beginning of the

novel, politics hardly touches Laila's life. It is a time of instant political activities when both the Hindus and the Muslims are together in their struggle against the British. The novelist tries to trace the causes of the growth of communal hatred and partly blames the British and partly the leaders of both communities. With the announcement of Partition, the exodus of the Muslims to Pakistan and that of the Hindus and the Sikhs to India becomes a common sight. The Partition creates a stronger dilemma for 'Ashiana' household. The creation of Pakistan offers Indian Muslims to migrate where they will have a sense of security and can rule according to their own choice. Both brothers Kemal and Saleem are parted and opt for different countries. The novel then, captures the moment that brought in the agent of redefining people, community and nation.

The setting of Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* is of a few days before Partition when the whole Indian subcontinent was engulfed by communal riots. In the novel, Murad Ali coerces Nathu, a low caste Hindu, into killing a pig on a false pretext. Later, the carcass was found in the premises of the local mosque. This reveals the methodology adapted by communal forces. The whole society churns itself into violence; similarly, even as the dehumanizing process of Partition overshadows beliefs, goodness, brotherhood and all other good values. Collective consciousnesses of the people went blank and were driven by animal instinct. *Tamas* is a kaleidoscope of the events during Partition. The novel, thus foresees the redefining of India through communally charged events.

Pages Stained with Blood by Indira Goswami depicts the gory Sikh pogrom in Delhi as an aftermath of the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in June 1984. First published in Assamese in *Goriyoshi* (1988), a literary journal in episodic form, it is pieced together from first person accounts of victims, newspaper reports and the unnamed female protagonist's relationship with the various men in her life during the early eighties of Delhi. The story follows a young Assamese woman who teaches at the University of Delhi and is an author. She is busy writing a book on Delhi and regularly jots down anything that crosses her mind. The Operation Blue Star at the Golden Temple in Amritsar brings sudden twist to the novel and the protagonist plunges headlong into the crisis. She witnesses with awe, the senseless massacre of thousands of innocent Sikhs for political vengeance. Human relations become meaningless and are limited to the question of individual survival. *Pages Stained with Blood* demonstrates the ugly side of violence into which the emerging Indian nation is drifting. Moreover, the novel also demonstrates that violence is becoming the only tool for settling issues, as insanity takes over civility- challenging the integrity of society as well as of the nation. The novel then, tries to understand the event of 1984, which is indeed one of the critical events after Partition that contests the construction of the idea of nation.

Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* is the story of the choices that a Hindu family makes when being

caught in the orgy of violence erupted in Bangladesh after the demolition of Babri *masjid* in India. The abduction, rape and killing of their daughter Nilanjana make the Duttas to believe that Bangladesh is no more their home. This leaves them with the only hope and option – India, the land for secular values and religious harmony, unity in diversity. *Lajja* doesn't tell us why Partition has happened, although it has several references to Partition in its plot. But, it is very affirmative in its approach towards the forces that divide and rip up the society. Religious fanaticisms, cruelty, the victory of the majority over minority – all are seen as the aspects of determining the psyche of the nation moving towards division in *Lajja*.

Blood Brothers by M.J.Akbar watches with awe the growing tension between the Hindus and Muslims of Telinipara who have been living together in peace for centuries. The novel is an advocate of peace, an example to demonstrate the fact that disputes can be settled with the strong determination of peace loving people. Published in 2006, at a time when the zealots are rising in India at an alarming rate to churn violence, the novel seeks solutions for social tensions and looks forward to peace. The novel leads us through the late decades of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th: the plague of 1890, the First World War, the Khilafat movement and Gandhiji's arrival on the scene, the hopes and frustrations over the Gandhi-Jinnah parleys. The ripples of big events, the chaotic political upheaval and the violence unleashed during the Partition reach Telinipara in slow motion but fail to disturb its equilibrium. *Blood Brothers* is also the story of how the nation is being constructed. It speaks about the India in the making: the starving farmer, the struggling mill-workers, the caste hierarchy, commerce, colony; the zealot forcing the fringe to violence, the sagely warrior of peace, neighbours who die for neighbours' sake, the Partition of India and the fracture of souls, India emerging under the Nehru era. *Blood Brothers* is a monument to Hindu-Muslim syncretism

Findings

It is true that partition is still alive in the collective psyche. The unfinished business of partition continues to haunt the nation, suggesting that historical wrongs have to be set right. In fact, one finds partitions everywhere: communal tensions, religious fundamentalism and continuing divisions on the basis of language. Partition was a defining moment in shaping and strengthening communitarian consciousness. Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus, we all redefined by the process of partition as religion become the prime explanatory category of nationhood. The scale and nature of violence made it one of the most violent events in the history of modern nation formation, and, surprisingly, and despite many warnings, the new governments of India and Pakistan were unprepared for the convulsion.

Another point that has to be remembered is that violence done to male bodies has received little attention unlike women's experience of the partition. The victims just wait and wail over what happened for

them. The memory of this violence just remains in the psyche which could resurface with every outbreak of violence in the society.

The treatment of the element of violence in literature does not make us get angry. Instead, they make us to realise that such things should not happen again. These works not only focus on violence, trauma and fragmented identities but also focus on survival. They are not only narratives of despair but also of determination to stay against odds, not to succumb to the massive sense of loss. They trace the lost subject in the form of characters who were never able to heal the wounds of partition. They talk about people who were left unanchored by a violent moment that had created irreparable gulf between home and belonging. Each character represents a tale of individual loss, of escape; a narrative rendered poignant by the sudden whiff of nostalgia for a lost homeland. To these uprooted, the geographical space called nation becomes vague, an apparition. Thus, the selected works reveal the delineation of the nation.

What is apparent in the selected works is that the energies of almost two generations have been employed in rebuilding lives shattered by the violent uprooting of partition. This process of rebuilding – of the nation and lives – is constantly challenged, altered and redefined with every repeated instances of violence in decades after partition. The selected works mark this subtle note. Thus, the experiences of women, violence and trauma during and after partition, as the chosen works delineate them, are a part of the complex process of nation making.

Conclusion

Is violence then, a permanent part of the Indian psyche? Perhaps not. As Bhisham Sahni opines, "barbarism is not a permanent feature of human conduct. It depends on a combination of circumstances which somehow incite man's born instincts. Under certain circumstances, men lose all sense of decency and proportion and indulge in butchery. After some time, the barbaric impulse will subside and give way to reason. Men begin to repent their actions"¹⁴. A riot is a transformatory as well as an historical event. The violent nature of a riot is not easily forgotten by the individuals involved or threatened, and tends to over shadow their other personal and historical experience (Suranjan Das. 213). It shapes and shelters perceptions and aspirations. People are changed: their attitudes to each other and their ways of thinking are transformed. Therefore, Partition violence too has played a crucial role in the setting up of minds in the Indian subcontinent.

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