

Trauma Literature: A Study of Partition Holocaust in Selected Indian Novels

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Abstract. Literature on trauma which became prominent after 1990s deals with some very prominent issues based on psychological, philosophical, ethical and aesthetic dimensions in representations of distressing events in art form. This particular form of literature studies how the effects of trauma upon individual survivors gets reflected and is received in society at large. The literature of trauma refracts nature of trauma, community of perpetrators, in consonance with contemporary social, political and cultural location. Further, literature of trauma acts as a therapeutic device wherein victims are relieved of their neurosis by recalling the memory of the painful experiences. It exists in a niche between personal and collective. That is how museums, memorials and remembrance days commemorate personal/collective sorrow by transmuting it into social consciousness. Another important aspect of trauma literature is the role of memory in rediscovering and translating the past. Using some of the insights provided by trauma studies, I propose in my paper a reassessment of the literature based on partition of India in 1947. For it, I have chosen Khuswant Singh's iconic novel *Train to Pakistan* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* for detailed study while referring to some important landmarks such as Saadat Hasan Manto's short story 'Toba Tek Singh' in my discussion of the various attributes of Trauma literature.

Keywords : Trauma literature; Indian literature; psychoanalysis; memory studies; partition novels.

The word 'trauma' has its origin in late 17th century Greek word 'traumatikos' which literally means wound. The dictionary meanings of the expression vary from 'a physical injury' to 'emotional shock' or 'deeply distressing or disturbing experience.' The meaning of the word in its later senses overlaps with the arena of psychology. The trauma theory in literature gained momentum after 1990s wherein trauma studies dealt with the representation of traumatic events in literature. In doing so it raises psychological, philosophical, ethical and aesthetic questions regarding the representations of a particular traumatic event. "Any experience which calls up distressing effects such as those of fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain" (Waugh, 499) can be called trauma.

Freud's observation that "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences" (499) connects trauma with repressed memories in the psyche.

The aim of literature of trauma is to enquire the effects of trauma upon individual survivors and the manner in which that trauma is reflected or received in a larger collective—political, cultural world. There is usually a central event which is frightening and full of violence—physical, mental or sexual. The narrative turns the uncontrollable event into a contained narrative by a competent writer through victims of the trauma who may be survivors, participants or eyewitnesses. When these aspects are repeated and written, their rewriting makes them a codified experience. According to Kali Tal, this codification of trauma "becomes a weapon in another battle, the struggle for political power" (Tal, 6). The speech of survivors of traumatic experiences is markedly found to be rich in terms like blood, madness, cruelty, murder, death, pain, scream, terror, hunger, thirst, humiliation, waiting. Even the familiar expressions get new meaning in the context of trauma. Any critic and reader of trauma literature has always to keep in mind the composition of community of trauma survivors, nature of trauma, community of perpetrators, relation between community of victims and perpetrators along with contemporary social, political and cultural location of the community of survivors.

Another significant aspect of trauma is that its retelling is a therapeutic technique close to Freud's 'talking cure' which is based on the idea that the victims may be relieved of their neurosis by recalling the memory of the painful experiences. Psychoanalysis studies neurotic symptoms in relation to dreams, jokes, slip of tongue, actions etc. Memory and desire are the chief tools used by the writer to add subjectivity to the narrative.

Now the question arises how do we grapple with trauma personally or collectively. Perhaps the aggression, tears, outrage, sorrow or silence are some of the behavioural responses in the victims. Khushwant Singh calls it an attempt to redeem guilt. The community/culture memorializes traumas through the museums, memorials and remembrance days. It includes our imagination to and responses to the consequences of a particular incident. Another important constituent of trauma literature is memory which plays an important role in rediscovering the past although we all know that past can never be fully represented. Yet it is only with the help of relieving/retelling the past with the help of memory that a writer experiments with the social and political realities of collective culture. Sigmund Freud in his lecture on 'The Origin and

Development of Psychoanalysis' (1909) asserts that there is a connection between desire, trauma and memory. There also has been a rapid increase in the study of psychology of 'shame' in recent times. Till late shame was associated with stigma but from 1970s to 1990s it has become the subject of psychoanalytic scrutiny and is viewed as pre-oedipal as guilt was oedipal. It is also called master emotion and according to Gershen Kaufman is a "multidimensional, multilayered experience" (Bouson, 11).

Using some of the insights provided by trauma studies, a reassessment of the literature based on partition of India in 1947 which stands as a category of its own becomes imperative. From a simple story 'Toba Tek Singh' to Khushwant Singh's iconic novel *Train to Pakistan* along with Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* there has been much fictional work which revisited traumatic experiences of individuals in these catastrophic events. The division of Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan was a man made calamity of unimaginable proportions so much so that it still lingers in the consciousness of not only survivors but also in the memory of those who heard the narratives through their family members or relatives. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were at the centre of the trauma and Sindhis, Bengalis, Punjabis and Parsis were at the periphery of these cataclysmic events. The literature dealing with the partition exists as separate category as Partition Novels and Mulk Raj Anand, Manohar Malgonkar, Chaman Lal Nahal, Khushwant Singh, Bapsi Sidhwa and Attia Hosain have revisited the event either as an event central to the theme or as a side issue focusing on its impact on both sides. As literature of trauma in its most simple sense is born out of human need to tell and retell the stories of their traumatic experiences which may be personal, communal or public, the narration or re-narration of trauma by the survivor not only widens the understanding of a particular event but also validates them as historical events. Their telling and retelling may make them national or cultural myths. The literature of partition is literature of trauma in this personal, communal and public dimensions.

The trauma of partition has myriads of meanings and experiences as far as women are concerned. During partition riots their body became synonymous with national, religious or communal honour making them victims of rape and torture. This shame-fear-dishonour-rejection syndrome led many victimized women to embrace death. Those who survived faced another trauma in the name of 'Recovery Operation' under which a date was fixed after which all women in the custody of other community were to be regarded as abducted and marriage and conversions after this date

were nullified. These abducted women also had a sense of shame, guilt and were uncertain about their acceptance in their erstwhile families. Hence even those women who had adapted to new circumstances were once more thrown into uncertainty and their old wound were opened afresh and their consent was never taken. Hence partition trauma in case of women was never geographical, religious or communal but a very different kind of painful experience.

Other important aspect related to trauma is about the identification of the 'survivor' and how to cope with the changes that are likely to creep in when the tale is retold by a survivor or a writer who is not a survivor? An individual survivor's reception may differ from another depending upon the social, religious, cultural and political environment around him/her. Khushwant Singh very relevantly puts it in his introduction wherein he says, "It was after the partition of the country was over, after ten million people had been rendered homeless and one million slain, that I had to purge myself of the guilt I bore by writing about it" (Singh, vii). He also admits that his circle of friend was not personally affected by the violence still there was a sense of guilt.

Violence is one key ingredient of all traumatic literature. Violence may be physical, emotional or sexual and the purpose of violence is dehumanization of victims. Mass victims are individuated into feeling and suffering human beings, each survivor with his/her own story to tell. In Partition literature there is not one subject pitted against the traumatic events but Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs ranged against one another. The violence ended up redefining people not only on the basis of caste, class, occupations etc. but in terms of their Hinduness, Muslimness and Sikhness. How violence leads to further violence thus creating a circle of hatred and atrocities is amply illustrated by the outburst of a youth in *Train to Pakistan*, who shouts, "For each Hindu or Sikh they kill, kill two musalmans. For each woman they abduct or rape, abduct two. For each home they loot, loot two. For each train load of dead they send over, send two across" (*Train to Pakistan*,130).

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1954) depicts the horrors of partition through his portrayal of life in a tiny, obscure village Mano Majra. Khushwant Singh puts Jugga at the center of trauma who is spiritually liberated towards the end of the novel. The narrative of *Train to Pakistan* is full of horrendous scenes which traumatized Muslim and Sikh population and thus filled them with vengeance. For instance there is reference to Sikh refugees who had had told of "women jumping into

wells and burning themselves rather than fall into the hands of Muslims. Those who did not commit suicide were paraded naked in the streets, raped in public and then murdered” (106). Another poignant scene in the novel occurs in the morning when it is reported that river water contained “men and women with [...] little children sleeping with their arms clutching the water...an old peasant had a deep wound on his neck [...] child’s head butted into old man’s armpit. There was a hole in its back [...] some were without limbs, some had their bellies torn open, many women’s breast were slashed” (124-125). Nooran, the heroine of the novel is pregnant with Jugga’s child and wants to stay but is forced to go to the refugee camp. In the same way Sundari, the daughter of Hukum Chand’s Orderly was raped and killed along with her husband while passing on the road of Gujranwala only four days after her marriage. Females like Nooran and Sundari have nothing to do with partition yet they become the victims of violence because they are symbolic of honour of male and molesting them is inflicting pain on the other.

If *Train to Pakistan* projects Indian perception of this traumatic experience just a few years after independence Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy Man* (1988) retells the same trauma after 40 years of partition happening on the other side of the border through Lenny who is a mouthpiece of Parsi Community living in Lahore thus infusing Pakistani and Parsi ethos in the narrative. Though dealing with partition riots and how they metamorphosed human relationships, the novel was perhaps written by the novelist with a certain aim in her mind. In the Introduction of the novel, the writer admits that her concern was the “evil done in the name of religion by politicians, and the ordinariness of the people who so mercilessly preyed on the victims of partition.” (Dhawan, 31-32). At another place she takes her concern further and feels that in ICM she tried to rectify the misrepresentation of Pakistan/Pakistanis in general. In an interview with David Montenegro she emphasises that the people of Pakistan have always been portrayed in a very unfavourable light and “a lot of readers in Pakistan, especially with ICM, feel that I’ve given them a voice.” (14). Since the experience of trauma undergoes changes in its representation and might reveal multiple sides of the same experience, the victor is metamorphosed into victim when seen from another vantage point. For instance Sidhwa says that she wrote *Ice-Candy Man* because she felt the presence of bias in the novels written on partition by the British and Indian novelists. She observed, “And they have been unfair to the Pakistanis. As a writer, as a human being one just does not tolerate injustice. I felt whatever little I could do to correct an injustice I would

like to do” (21). There are many references in the novel where the prominent names like Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Lord Mountbatten, S.C. Bose, Jinnah are presented in unfavourable manner. For example to Lenny Gandhi appears “as an improbable mixture of a demon and a clown” (*Ice-Candy Man*, 87). Sidhwa’s sympathies for Jinnah are revealed when she says that “In *Ice-Candy Man* I was just redressing [...] a very grievous wrong that has been done to Jinnah and Pakistanis by many Indian and British writers. They have dehumanized him, made him a symbol of the root of partition” (Dhawan, 21-22). It reveals that identity and power politics always run deeper into the trauma narratives.

The novel reveals ‘shame’ as the axis around which different characters attempt to build their lives. The abduction of Ayah by Muslim goons spurred by Ice Candy man converts Ayah from a life giving earth to a guilt ridden object. Lenny says about Ayah “I know Ayah is deeply, irrevocably ashamed. They have shamed her [...] I’m not very clear how [...] but I’m certain of her humiliation” (*Ice-Candy Man*, 254). Sidhwa presents Lenny’s Ayah as a helpless victim of violence. Here the traumatic experience leaves Ayah spiritually dead and she says, “I am past that. I am not alive” (262). Hamida who takes care of Lenny while Ayah is abducted, a victim of partition violence uprooted from her home and living in rehabilitation camp, calls herself "a fallen woman" (214). She fears that if Lenny’s mother would know about her identity, she would have to quit the job. Urvashi Butalia while talking about the predicament of the women during partition says, “In times of communal strife and violence women remain essentially non-violent and are at the receiving end of violence as victims and they are left with the task of rebuilding the community” (Gaur, 170).

The objectification of women during partition riots is aptly revealed in the novel and the mindless butchery on their bodies is recounted again and again in the text. For instance a character in *Ice-Candy Man* reports, “A train from Gurudaspur has just come in, he announces, panting. ‘Everyone in it is dead. Butchered. They are Muslims. There are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny bags full of women’s breast!’” (*Ice-Candy Man*, 149). At another place there is narration of Sikhs attacking five villages “like swarms of locusts, moving in marauding band of thirty and forty thousands. They are killing all Muslims. Setting fires, looting, parading the Muslim women naked through the streets—raping and mutilating them in the centre of villages and in mosques.” (197)

Looking back the event from the present day position, many questions remain unanswered: Why Hindus and Muslims became two rival forces when they were jointly fighting against the British? Who was the main culprit—the British Government, the Congress leaders or Muslim league? We find that all interpretations are personal reconstructions. In this labyrinth of shifting political allegiances, the common man becomes the victim of forces beyond his control. It makes him/her find virtues even in the British Raj for the security and safety it provided. Such a view is voiced by the lambardar who exclaims, “Freedom must be a good thing. But what will we get out of it? ... Will we get more lands or more buffaloes” (*Train to Pakistan*, 44)? A little later he further says, “All we hear is kill, kill...we were better off under the British. At least there was security” (45).

Partition literature, thus, is a treasure trove of traumatic experiences of the millions of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims who had to pass through such horrendous experiences. These events left their mark on the survivors who found themselves bereft of their accustomed world and challenges of new environment were too heavy on them. The burden of their past affected not only the spectators and victims but even the next generation which carried this burden through the tales and songs which they learnt from the older generation. These experiences travelled from personal to communal and became a legacy which both people of India and Pakistan carry even to this day.

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