Sights and Sites of Communal Violence: Reading Memory through Temporality

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> I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,
> But I saw they were not as was thought,
> They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,
> The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,
> And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,
> And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.
> - Walt Whitman, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"

To justify the magnitude of its violence, war may be justified in order to restore the virtuous in the world, but the discourse of suffering in a tale as great as the *Mahabharata* does not limit to five Pandavas or a hundred Kauravas—for the catastrophe in the *yuddh* was not merely of brothers against each other but also the defeat of soldiers from both ends. In this battle of *dharma* and *adharma*, they were merely pawns, and regardless of the side he fights from, the defeat of a soldier is destined as and when he enters the battlefield. The battle called Partition may have been locked into a void, but it is certainly not a closed chapter. These fears and anguish of the Collective are reinforced when such historical events create ripples across its present. The Hydra that Partition was, propagated riots like the Babri Masjid bloodbath, the anti-Sikh carnage of 1984 or Godhra riots of 2002, which were not violent acts autonomous of Partition, but were reflections of, and also impending channelisations of the revulsion religious groups had for each other. The histories of these barbaric acts carried under the garb of religion belonged to another history, and this is how violence does not allow itself to evaporate. This Hydra serpent keeps springing into its multiple due to indifference and indifferent approaches made towards the tragedy of mankind, and great literature is born out of this collective human suffering.

A communal tragedy where daggers, blood, and hatred entered places of worship and still refuse to leave extends its collectivisation to the spatiality of the present. Three decades hence, extremism engulfed the state of Punjab during the 1970s. Fundamentalists had begun the separatist movement of Khalistan, which gained momentum in the 1980s. These separatists, driven by the collective conscience that their religion was under grave threat, took the path of violence to achieve their means. As a way to maintain the social integrity of the nation-state intact, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi executed

Operation Bluestar—the military attack on the holy Sikh shrine Golden Temple in order to execute Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his allies. Between the crossfire of the army and those rebelling them, thousands of innocent pilgrims were held captive and killed. The desecration of their holiest shrine and the killing of innocent Sikhs hurt collective Sikh sentiments. Later that year, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was slain by her two Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984. As a result, the assassination triggered subjective and targeted violence against Sikhs in northern India, majorly Delhi, Punjab and Kanpur. Hindu mobs with the political support of Congress leaders burnt Sikh households, shops, and people. Men of each household were pulled out by the hair and burnt alive, and their women raped. Mothers would chop their sons' hair so that the rioter would not know it is a Sikh child. Those whose bodies were unharmed had their hearts tittered in pieces. He, who had left his heart in his homeland during the exodus of 1947, now faced another separation from his people. This time, the Sikh innocent man was betrayed by his own state. It was Partition again, for the daggers were out this time too—this time not to kill the Muslim but the Sikh brother. The moral complexity of the anti-Sikh carnage of 1984 lied in the impressionistic spreading of rumours and raising of slogans against Sikhs which opinionated Hindu mobs to loot and kill, where rationality was suspended by a collective hyper-political being. Life was reduced thus to a mere slogan.

The mutilation of *Akhand Bharat* was one such problematised propaganda which carried with itself the suffering of the Collective, regardless of the borders created on the grounds of the land and the mind. The affliction of Partition is not limited to the physical brutality read and reread over the years but scatters over to the psychological and emotional capturing per se. Physical brutality is the lowest form of violence—for once you are dead, you are relieved of the sorrow. Grimmer is the suffering which is not physical, for even if the wounds fade away with time, the scars on the psyche of the survivor remain. Tragedy is a joy to the man who dies.

An event of the past, especially a communally charged political event like Partition or the genocide of 1984, can be broadly spoken of, without juxtaposing into binaries, in two ways—through the historian's history or the accounts of the survivor. The portrayal of community or nation's history will always be incomplete and astray due to the politics of its representation, and it will only glorify the oppressor for he is the one who holds the pen until the victim chooses to write his own narrative. These narratives in the form of memoirs and testimonies provide an alternate perspective about the crisis which history often omits in its narrative. Personal documentations have their gullible nature, but when intertwined with aesthetics of life credo, they turn into great literature of suffering. While the official history chooses to ignore the grim realities of the

unrest, real and fictional narratives are fragmented and oscillatory stories inflicted with silence and often incomprehensible.

History shall always elevate one and condemn the other, but literature through its fictional or non-fictional representation puts on the reader's plate an often unbiased take on suffering, which transcends from individual to collective through literature. What makes literature greater than the partial official history is its palimpsest nature of speaking underneath the silences. Each violent upheaval reflects its past, and for the creation of a master narrative of each community that traces its trajectory, it is crucial to unify all voices into a single social text. The master narrative of the Sikhs in independent India that absorbs all voices, and even the silences, cannot be created without a little alteration, delineation, and forgetting of the experiential reality. The amnesia then also silences the bond between Hindus and Sikhs—which was a long journey of shared worship and mythology, cultural integration and exchange, language, and everyday lifestyle. Similarly, the equally close bond that Sikhs shared with Muslims has been eradicated through the communal violence of the late forties in Punjab.

In a multicultural and pluralistic society like India, the problem of communalism and religious extremism gained momentum ever since the nation acquired independence in 1947, and simultaneously raised walls to a land a part of its own. Post-independence, rising communalism has directly victimised women and ethno-religious minorities in particular. And while each Indian citizen carries multiple identities based on their affiliations to caste, politics, and religion, unruly becomes the governance when these inclinations turn into ideologies and conflicts in the public sphere, staining the very fabric of democracy with the Saffron and Green of their own.

Literature written on the Partition of India or the Sikh genocide of 1984 is an exploration of scribed violence through its silences, texts and textures of which are caught up between speech and silences. The paper attempts to read how and when memory turns into silences and these silences after a long journey of anxiety transmute into courageous articulation. These silences, with time, gain space into confessions to the Self, and are woven into a social text by the community's act of collectivisation.

Violence, of any kind, leads to two possible conditionings of the victim—either they withdraw from speech to silence and don't articulate the suffering at all, or they live in the denial and nostalgia of the past marked before the violent disruption. Memory is always collective, and so is suffering. But the entire act of inflicting the history and triumph of one's community on the body that belongs to the other subjects the victim's body as a contested national and

gendered space. This collective memory involves simultaneous remembering and forgetting. And its simultaneity places history and trauma not in the space of causal factor but as elements that shape the narrative of a heterogeneous society. Thus, collective memory is the language of trauma that either resorts to silence completely or confronts colonial or communal victimisation by means of unified individual narratives, not *recollected in tranquillity* but amidst the creaking silences in the chaos of the 'foreign land' that the displaced person continually fails to call home. Krishna Sobti asserts in *Partition Dialogues:* "I, wrote *Zindaginama* thirty years after the Partition, even though I had made the first draft in 1952. Time is a strange chemistry. First we wanted to forget and then we wanted to relive the time that was!" (qtd. in Bhalla 103), which further problematises the complexities of the displaced refugee.

Trauma, whether in the past or the present never ceases to haunt the victim. It resurfaces itself in the form of extended hatred, detestation, and silence as a form of reluctance. As a result of the colonial hangover, silence further levies itself upon both the instigator and the victim, both for redemption and reacceptance in the society. Silence is the State's tool to rework and mend the victim's experiential history to mint a master narrative glorious and unblemished of the displacement of the victim. As a result of this conditioning at the centre, to thrust the voice of the victim majoritarian at the periphery, in a rather appalling moment of violence, the victim drapes the garb of silence, voluntarily or involuntarily. It then serves as a coping mechanism for the victim, which ultimately results in them muting their discourse to negotiate the gap between their pre-trauma and post-trauma life. At the same time, this muteness also works as a shadow under which the instigator victimises. Silence is paranoia. Silence is deliberate. The idea is to read violence and trauma through memory, not histories, the contours of which demand deep and continual excavation in academia.

Veena Das questions the ways of mourning found in the discourse of independent India that seek to recreate or alter the world, to this, she regressively suggests: In the normal process of mourning, grievous harm is inflicted by women on their own bodies, while the acoustic and linguistic codes such as that of mourning laments makes the loss public. Upon asking women to narrate their experiences of the Partition she found a zone of silence around the event (Das 84).

Repressed memory—whether quietened in public or shunned in private, often operates like a mechanism to cope with its trauma through the trajectory/ reminiscing of pre-trauma memories; some choose to silence their narrative instead of placing it on the surface. This adapted silence is also often imposed on the victim by the orchestrators of organised violence. The victim also recalls

their personal history through two ways of contesting or romanticising—their memories of mortification are eventually turned into tales of martyrdom and these biographies become social texts with the collective nature of memories of the community. Urvashi Butalia writes in *The Other Side of Silence* (2000): "It took 1984 to make me understand how ever-present partition was in our lives too, to recognise that it could not be so easily put away inside the covers of history books. I could no longer pretend that this was a history that belonged to another time, to someone else" (23). The incoherence of social and relational matrices caused in India of 1947 levied themselves as collateral damage to the anti-Sikh carnage of 1984, which also tested *humanness* to redefine morality and views humankind on moral, ethical, and aesthetic grounds. The discourses of pre-violence memories, or tales of bravery and victory like in the case of the Sikh militant discourse, keep the identity of the community alive and preserve its culture while also simultaneously integrating the history of violence in the post-trauma memory., The mark made on the victim's psyche is undeniably unalterable, but this process of collectivisation—converging the divergent local, personal, and authentic histories and cultural collectivisation bridge the gap in the victim's psyche, trying at the very least to repair the inability to fathom trust in another individual, providing an escape, however little, from the suffering. There is solace in empathy when one himself is in a state of negotiation with the times and spaces he lives in.

The myth, tradition, and history of the community play a vital rolewhile talking about violence and memory. They speed up the communal drive in contemporary India besides succeeding to unite individual memories of suffering into a collective narrative of the community—which does not fade away but only manifests itself again in another riot, another violent upheaval. The memory of the victim is claimed by the community, not through mere historical factualisation but is also bases of on the mythical and religious narratives. For instance, the instigation of riots of Ayodhya lay on the mythical narrative of Ayodhya as the birthplace of Lord Rama.

This conflict of memorialising history or willing to forget it also causes in some the problem of fragmentation of expression. Emotionally expressing oneself is another way of coping with suffering. While Manto's Sakeena incorporates silence after being brutally raped, and Munawwar Rana describes the pangs of Partition by wearing on his sleeve the identity of being a *muhaajir*, there are also people in abundance like Joginder Paul's Deewane Maulvi, who surrenders to cynicism as a result of stunning suffering impending on him.

The truthfulness of the events of 1947 and 1984 state facts placed by the government on the psyche of public identity, but silence and memory play a dispassionately dominant role here. If at all the Hindu is expressive of the violence

inflicted on them during Partition, seldom would they accept tying a tyre to a Sikh's neck during the carnage of 1984—silence as a strategy also becomes a garb the victimiser wears, oft also becoming his redemptive shelter. Silence is the shadow under which Manto's Ishwar Singh from "Thanda Ghosht" rapes a Muslim woman, the muteness of which disturbs his relational matrix in the course of the story. It is the garb under which the victimiser hides his shaming reality.

To curtail an individual from reminiscing their cherished past is difficult. However, being unable to place it in our memory is agonising. Life is but a long journey of excruciating partitions. Our imagination is intertwined with words, which dies out when words fade away with age. The nuances of the past are bottled up in the memory of the victim which may well be called the 'grecian urn' of human emotions with abrasions of unpleasant memories on its surface, but most of the time it does not find the right channel to articulate. Memory is a land, and a nation is an idea with no boundary or physical contours. For the victim, the reality before the disruption becomes inaccessible both in memory and reality. With time, memory gets deprived of a space to surface itself. The signifier which signifies the happiness or remorse of the refugee dies with age. Language and emotion used to resurface nostalgia and memories go under constant accretion. This discontinuity and rupture between the signifier and signified create a gap which results in nostalgia as trauma. The pull between experiential memory and reality numbs them to their suffering. The sufferers are then in constant negotiation with their past and present.

The victim dies in the gap of desolate present and a relatively smoother past. The past is not a 'foreign land,' rather is the space where one belongs but only irretrievably distant in time. The present is, what Rushdie states, "elsewhere" (Rushdie 3). The refugee's words to reminisce the experience of violence fossilize out with time when they do not find the channel to articulate, or when the memory of the experience is often controlled and curtailed in the name of religious consciousness or when the implications or signifiers of the space have died out with time, and this inability to place the land of memory on a space creates a silent spectrum of insanity for the victim doubly displaced.

Studying one's psyche extends itself from reading the spaces of silences, memories, and memorialisation. The "collective amnesia" (Pandey 7) found among refugees and survivors of Partition riots was not only consistent with forgetting colonial injustice but also the indignities sprouted from communal hatred. Doubly subjugated victims of communal hatred are women, whose lives were altered and re-narrated by the State in the massacre of 1984. As Butalia states: "this collection of memories, individual and collective, familial and historical, are what make up the reality of Partition. They illuminate what one

might call the 'underside' of its history. They are the ways in which we can know this event. In many senses, they are the history of the event" (8).

There have been heterogeneous responses for treating trauma and turning it into ideas of remembrance and memorialisation. Archives, historical sites, and monuments that mark the 'martyrdom' of fighters are sites of tangible memory, opposing which Butalia mentions in *The Other Side of Silence* that victims of Partition "have no monuments" (40). The very site of traumatic memory is itself the nation. The land on which memories of trauma are scribed happen to be the body and the nation—also manifested through the iconicity of *Bharat Mata.* The line of partition, often pictured as the dismemberment of the sacrosanct *Bharat Mata,* was drawn across the body of the woman, not only rupturing her bosom but also leaving a deep scar on her psyche. After a certain stage of shaming the Self due to failures they believe they brought to the community by allowing the victimiser to 'mark' them, it becomes crucial to give the pain an expression. But victims, and especially women, internalise the pain to unfathomable depths of inexpressible privacy. When the voice of the victim is muted during any violent disruption, the absence of a personal narrative manipulates the larger text of democracy. Language is inherently important for the creation of a community or State's history, but an event of violence leaves the reality devoid of any courage and figures of speech. The only language that remains is that of silence. Some who fail to endure the bolts of disruption clutch to selective or total silence, which perpetuates in the life of these survivors until their ability to wear the scars of grief burns out. Sometimes the individual biography of the victim becomes the voice of lament for the entire community, and sometimes such stories are erased from the social text and collective memory of the community—all in the name of bringing back the lost glory.

An individual who has been captured becomes an individual who has been marked. In the times of crisis, by the culprit or the society, a mark is put on the psyche of the individual. Thus, the mark thus becomes a hindrance to forgetting—the body becomes a memory, a testimony of the disparity of society. Veena Das, in her essay "Transactions in the Construction of Pain" (1996) mentions how the collective experience of women's suffering never entered the public discourse. Bodies of any victims, male or female, are sights of testimonies of the indignities caused to them—they speak for themselves, not in public, but in the private spaces of their minds, "monochromatically" (Rushdie 3).

Another stance of the victim's history that sprouts from the violence is that the victim recovers from his survivor-conflicts until the Self, which is raptured, is reintegrated into normalcy. Here crops the need to align trauma of the Self to the nation's course of history. The failure to do so produces a Toba

Tek Singh, a Deewane Maulvi, and a Ratan *ki maa* along with innumerable people to whom silence and denial sprawled as results of ground shaking violence. Silence has its own cynicism. The way history is space and man partial towards its representation because of the impossibility of complete representation—any historical document will always be a non-sequential fragment. This lack of sequence marks the trauma and difficulty of recalling, a reliving of time past even as time present flows through the past, when recollecting, Ratan's mother in Asghar Wajahat's *Jis Lahore Ni Vekheya*... (2006) says, *"Jis Lahore ni vekheya oh jammeya he nai.."* (Wajahat 6), not for the Lahore of time present but of the time past—of a Lahore where her son Ratan was still alive and where she was not seen as a *kaafir*. Each victim's story is a story of suffering that extends itself to bringing the pieces together, and how they have arranged their present within the horizons of their past. It is characters like Deewane Maulvi in Joginder Paul's *Sleepwalkers* (1998), living in the juxtaposition of their time and space, with an eventual knowledge of the loss levied on them. Lucknow for Deewane Maulvi is a signifier of belongingness as much as Lahore is for Ratan's mother. The feelings are stagnant and static while the space has changed, the only difference that lay between the two characters is that Maulvi is physically displaced, but his mental space is acquired by the time of Lucknow and its *nawabi* culture before the violence and displacement, rendered in a state of placelessness. On the other hand, Ratan's mother does not live in denial of her son's death, but the implications of the space in which she continues to live and the signification derived out of it has changed with time. These heterotopic spaces of Lucknow and Lahore remain as mere spaces of the heart, not of geopolitics, thus marking a departure from topology to topography.

What does history look like when seen through the eyes of a victim? How does history represent itself or memory recall itself when told by a Sikh to a Hindu or a Hindu to a Muslim? Retelling and recounting memories has haphazard and unnatural ties with time present and past. These recollections may or may not contradict the primary feelings of undergoing the experiences emerging through lapses of time. Sometimes, memory can also refuse to manifest itself into speech. Some memories are extensively described, some neglected, and some never brought on the surface at all. Of the totality of life that underwent the pre-partition days of harmony and post-partition years of exile, only a fragment of the oscillation is offered to the second or third generations, which is an act of rebellion to confront with the past one could never accept as the present. The silence that envelops abducted women often compels them to "re-narrativize their relationship to the state, community, and their own identities" (Didur 138) to compromise and weave a meaning of the violence which creates scars on their bodies. This negotiation, however another constituent for trauma, becomes crucial for survival.

There are many similarities in the way in which motifs are stitched together and a world created through storytelling in the oral discourse of the Sikh militant and the way in which these stories are woven and the militant disguised as a victim, which forges a sense of legitimisation of his terrorism as revolution. The idea of Sikh history as a series of martyrdoms for social well-being further deceives the militant into transforming the Self into a heroic figure. The Sikh militant discourse elevates the biography of the Self into a social text, which ultimately makes him believe that the community is in grave threat. Thus, the imperative of defending the community's pride by means of violence is framed by institutionalisation of memory. It is not only the nation-state that tries to regulate collective memory in a manner that makes the individual die and kill for the cause; there are also communities which, in the process of emerging as political actors, try to control and fix memory in a similar pattern. In the process of reconstruction and fixation of memory of a collective (especially a community), myths play an impactful role. Myths are a way of constructing the past like history is. Myths that run through the Sikh community are the tool of empowerment for religious and political extremists, where they draw inspiration from tales and sacrificial traditions of bravery amongst the gurus and the tenets of Sikhism. At the same time, the phenomenon of forgetting works as the master narrative that associates the Sikh suffering to the colossal Sikh identity as always being a preserver of honour and sacrificial to the predicament of Hindus and Muslims. The separatists could not retain that this bravery was for a causal event and involved selflessness. So the Khalistan Movement, under the garb of welfare, pushed to death the accused and innocent alike. The agitation of separatism has been justified through the betrayal and agony of the state, but the means to achieve demands have not. But one cannot counter myth to history as truth to falsehood. Factuality of events stated in a mythical story may not have a spatio-historical reference, but are placed within the realms of the world and reality. They talk about the world symbolically and metaphorically. For something that cannot be backed up through historical justification is put through the course of myth, an example of which is the long-standing dispute of Babri-Ramjanmabhoomi in a democratic, communal India.

The flood of communal violence sweeps the mass and its hopes associated with one's future, one's faith in one's religion, beliefs, and one's own self. Morality in the carnage that followed Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination was tossed in the sky that smelled of blood and fell on streets full of corpses of those who didn't know why they had been targeted, ripped off their *dastaar* and dignity, and put ablaze. Those who had shaved their heads to guise as Hindus also fractured hearts out of their bodies. The Sikh man left alive was left to ponder how long would it take for him to feel a part of the nation—from

1947 to 1984—and many betrayals by the state apart, with a seemingly never-ending journey of thirty-seven years in search of peace, dignity, and communal harmony.

The only empathy that this complexity hints towards is that instead of demanding complete autonomy over its people and creating a melting pot of homogeneity, it is essential for a community to unify its members by being denotive of tradition, revitalisation, and nostalgia, and create a space of peaceful coexistence for its members. While collective survival is essential, the members' autonomy to refuse any claims made on them by the community is also pivotal, just how the community has, under no obligation, the right to contest the claims of the state. The silences, however fragmented in nature, need to be addressed and preserved like a legacy.

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