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Dialects of Violence

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Abstract – The dialectics of violence, particularly characterizing the partition of the sub-continent, indeed exercised many a creative soul to articulate an artistic response to the life event. The contours of this creative endeavour, in fact, parallel the multiple manifestations of this phenomenon in actuality that constantly and with an ever increasing intensity explodes through the fluid and yet uncrystallised socio-cultural and political matrix of India. The reflective representation and the creative comprehension of partition within the literary construct presupposes an organising poetics--structuration of the processes of meaning to understand and foreground the epistemological and ontological potentials/implications of the socio-cultural reality embedded in the narrative contestations of partition. This, at best, in the bulk of partition fiction in English, is provided by structuring of the discourse through binary aesthetics. It implies the construction of meaning by making a difference, a distinction within a system of opposites and contrasts.

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INTRODUCTION

This aesthetic principle is the common denominator of almost all major partition novels and impinges alike on their delineation of the themes. For example, in most of the novels, the delineation and discussion of the communal issue invariably involves a pre-conceived 'othering' and privileging of the secular by the communal, despite the palpable presence of one as imposed or thought of and the other as felt or experienced. In more competent writers, however, the binaries--though palpably present--lead to a tension that seems to pull the narrative in two different directions, each pull cancelling the impact of the other. **Train to Pakistan**, perhaps, illustrates it better than other novels. In it the writer sees communal breakdown as sin and a breakdown of the 'composite' reality of the Indian social past and establishes humanistic/secular ideal as a futuristic alternative to this aberration but the pain that he had undergone as the partition victim is so real that it seeps into the narrative and threatens to negate his secular credentials.

The incorporation of this 'slant' within binary aesthetics can be partially understood if we take into consideration the moment and milieu in which most of these literary creations were ultimately produced. Most of these writers belonged to the middle or upper-middle English educated elite which consciously imbibed and sided with euphoric agenda of nation building. This agenda in the aftermath of independence and till early seventies was entrenched in secular tradition. This tradition, in turn, drew its sustenance from and manifested itself in such slogans as unity in diversity and compositeness of Indian cultural traditions that were harnessed and nurtured by various strands within INC, the umbrella movement in the vanguard of 'national' struggle for freedom. Apparently, partition was seen as a 'blot' in the triumphant march of anti-colonial struggle and consequent birth and consolidation of a modern and secular India. In such a situation, though the bloodshed of partition rankled in the consciousness of these authors, it was 'revisited' either with a sense of guilt or only to 'draw a moral lesson'. Consequently, most of these writers are unable to squarely face the breakdown of significance inherent in the partition chaos. The tendency in them to apportion the blame justly can be linked with this uneasiness.

This failure of the literary imagination to rise to the occasion shunts the presentation of partition within two distinct but ideologically converging modes. It is either viewed as an event, a one historical–episode, static–manolithic and homogenous, one item set that happened to Hindus (Sikhs)/Muslims of the Indian sub-continent on the eve of independence, or as an extreme case of or an item of a wide and familiar categories of the social phenomenon--class or caste feuds, colonially created communal riots--within the subcontinent.

The first way of presenting it makes partition a unique event, but comfortably uncharacteristic and socio-culturally inconsequential. The adherents of 'one-item-set' approach, and they are in majority,

usually portray partition as a unique happening "with nothing to compare it within the large and dense inventory of ethnic and religious prejudices and aggressions."[1] The Hindu/Muslim antagonism is merely seen as an 'aberration' or a madness that was the result of unique processes of colonialism and subsequent decolonization, i.e., the divide and rule policy of the Britishers and its attendant construction of communalism. This madness, however, does not fit into the 'routine' or everyday societal essence of Indian civilization. But as Bauman says, "this may perhaps shed some light on the pathology of the society in which it occurred, but hardly adds anything to our understanding of the society's normal state."[2] This shortcoming, apparently a function of a secular humanistic inclination of the authors glosses over complexities inherent both in the pre and post contours of the partition holocaust.

The second mode of analysis considers partition as an extreme item within a vast category of socially loathsome and repellent but unavoidable condition of human existence. They underline its recurrent and ubiquitous nature by linking it to the primordial but 'natural' predisposition of human nature, immune to any enlightening manipulations of rational thought. Malgonkar in **A Bend in the Ganges** and Raj Gill in **The Rape**, to some extent, seem to advocate this line of argument. This consideration of partition violence as an extension of pre-modern and culturally (which in this case is collapsed with religious) embedded differences, once again fails to comprehensively decode or register the "potentialities" inherent in it.

Oscillating between these two modes of representations and comprehension, most of these authors, located as they are within the modernistic paradigms of empirically accessible reality, fail to fathom that the partition violence was something more than a mere aberrant event or a pathological deviance from a logical path of enlightened project of decolonization. The sense of bewilderment and disillusionment that we find in most of these authors, despite locating the causes of partition in sociological or historical contexts, gives the impression of this lack of understanding. So busy are they in situating the fault for violence out there, that instead of letting the holocaust of partition 'speak to them' about itself and about the hidden potentialities of human nature, they try to seize it within the scope of reason. And this inevitably leads to an aesthetic of binary delineation. Consequently, they fail to bring, what Bauman calls, the "issue of potentiality versus reality (the first being yet undisclosed mode of the second, and second being an already realised–and thus empirically accessible–mode of the first)"[3] in their conception of the partition and, thus, are unable to see it as a "rare, yet significant and reliable test of the hidden potentials of modern [Indian] society."[4] And this lacuna in their understanding resists an attempt on their part to squarely acknowledge partition holocaust as, to modify Bauman's observation, the merely uncovered another face of the same modern (secular and syncretic) society "whose other, more familiar face we so admire. And that the two faces are perfectly comfortably attached to the same body. What we perhaps fear most is that each of the two faces can no more exist without the other than can the two sides of a coin."[5]

In the absence of such an all-inclusive epistemology, these authors, unlike Manto in his stories, fail to look at the breakdown of significance inherent in partition full in the face. Manto was not afraid of presenting partition as the other face of human condition – immoral, perverted, violent and unreasonable. He did not indulge himself in the niceties of apportioning blame justly or constructing the stories to "uphold the principle of 'correct remembrance.'"[6] He recognized the psychopathic and sadistic dimensions of the carnage. In his world, the living did not seem to fare any better than the dead…Manto felt that "violence of partition signified not only the triumph of unreason, but also pathological, perverted reason."[7]

Thus the logic of binary poetics, at least in the novels primarily betraying emotional or affective response to partition, is rooted in the nature of their presentation of the phenomenon. As a corollary, it enables the present study to use structuralist critical tools to unravel the strengths and limitations of this literary output. The rationale for evoking and applying these apparently western critical methods to understand the creative response to partition in the Indian English novels is rooted in the assumption that this genre in Indian English is still cast in the mould of western fictional parameters.

This poetics of binaries, apart from its applicability to the present study, also becomes instrumental in understanding and 'theorizing' the failures of Indian-English fiction to comprehensively problematize the phenomenon of partition violence. The partition authors also bring to bear multiple perspectives ranging from administrative to economic on their attempts to explain the intensity and scale of violence unleashed in the wake of partition. But these attempts in the ultimate analysis are found to be rooted in their overall conviction that these were only the distorted extensions of communalism or colonialism, the ultimate repository of dehumanization.

Many writers try to understand it as organized and orchestrated by law enforcement agencies like the army **(Train to Pakistan**, **Azadi**, **The Rape etc.)**, or the police **(Train to Pakistan**, **Azadi)** and their functionaries, or by willing hench-men of various political or quasi-political organizations **(Ashes and Petals**, **A Bend in the Ganges**, **The Dark Dancer)** and a communalized bureaucracy.

However, these writers donot see it merely in terms of breakdown of the law or order, but as a suspension of it, that allowed for the brutalities: "Had

this not been the case, few would have been motivated enough, to leave their homes and lands and livelihoods, and resettle in a new country… They were forced out of villages and towns by the ferocity of attacks on them, creating enough terror to banish any doubt or possibility of reconciliation."[8] This explanation seems to run throughout the partition fiction, but is established with added passion in **The Rape**.

Another representation of partition violence seeks to underscore the economic factor as a powerful motivator. It is manifested in the form of greed for material possession in many a work. Abdul Ghani in **Azadi,** Malli in **Train to Pakistan**, Agarwal in **Sunlight on a Broken Column** come readily to the mind as the typical representatives of assorted adventurers and opportunists who saw the partition violence as a short cut to material betterment. The conversion of Gangu Mull, husband of Bibi Amrarvati in **Azadi** brings out yet another facet of the economics of violence. However in **Sunlight on a Broken Column,** the exodus of Saleem to Pakistan, though motivated by the prospects of careerism, belongs to a different cognitive category.

Most of the writers, however, represent the cult of violence as rooted in communalism. It is seen as the most virulent form of conflict, as it is "generally a blend of religious political, and economic aims, becomes imbued with religious ultimacy."[9] And the psychological dynamics of communal propaganda during the closing stages of colonialism had turned the issues at stake [the necessity of a separate homeland for Muslims, the fear of Hindu Majorityism, the exigencies for politics of power camouflaged in the garb of cultural exclusiveness etc.], into life and death issue "through an arsenal of ideational and ritual symbols",[10] leading to heightening of "group salience",[11] which ultimately split the social and individual selves of people. This aspect of communalism, the tendency to reduce people into abstractions, to be guided by the 'form' rather than the 'content' or to treat human beings as generic entities rather than as individuals–finds expression in all the writers.

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