

INTERROGATING HISTORY THROUGH MEMORY IN PARTITION NARRATIVES

Shabina Nishat Omar

Principal

Milli Al-Ameen College (For Girls),

Kolkata.

In *The Other Side of Silence* Urvashi Butalia reports what Krishna Sobti, a writer and a refugee in 1947, once said about the Partition : it is “difficult to forget and dangerous to remember.” This statement contains two major implications: one the one hand the impossibility to cancel from one’s private memory a past experience of such traumatic impact on one’s life, and on the other hand, the risk ingrained in such a memory since recalling it means not only letting traumatic experiences painfully resurface but also trying to come to terms with them by giving them an order, a signification that may turn out to be intractable and also intolerable. How can one make sense of the atrocities witnessed as a victim or as a perpetrator, of the loss of one’s home and identity in the name of the boundaries sanctioning new nations? In 1947 a dualistic and even ambivalent event occurred. On the one hand it was the culmination of the long sought for Independence and simultaneously, the disruption of the lives of millions of people. This ambivalent duality has resulted in a fracture of memory too: official public memory as opposed to alternative private memory. Public memory is discriminative, it foregrounds all that is functional to the national project of state - building, it emphasizes heroism, sacrifice for the common cause and glorifies Independence, and in the process, the suffering and trauma of its dark side is concealed and suppressed. It is the kind of selective memory we find in the historian’s history and school textbooks. Public memory informs official history, “an artificial form of remembering” and requires of the traditional historian a bodiless absence with objectivity to sort faces and arrange them erasing what does not fit into his homogeneous and linear pattern. As Foucault explains in *L’Archéologie du Savoir*, history rebuilds the past planning teleologies and neglects gaps and dislocations.

Private memory fragmentary and partial as it may be, is there, flesh and blood to testify to a past which persists in the present trauma and represents the only site of mourning in the absence of any monuments, memorial or ceremony to remember the victims of Partition. It may be fragmentary and partial but it deals with the inexplicable too and represents the site of an alternative rendering of facts and events. Private memory represents what Sidonie Smith (talking about autobiography) defines as “experiential history” which “can function as counter-memory, a means to re-narrativize the past and break the silences of official history” or what has elsewhere been labelled “emotional history” since it takes into account the affective and psychological backlash historical events produce in human beings.

In their article “Engaging Subjective Knowledge”, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph advance an interesting discussion on the validity and usefulness of subjective knowledge in social and political studies: the knowledge----they argue---- produced in diaries and personal testimonies that does not claim the status of truth but simply of a “telling what I know” tale, a partial truth, tied to particular circumstances, times and places. This kind of knowledge challenges the epistemological claim to objectivity and shows that the pretence to know the whole truth is something unattainable by mortals; it offers narratives of reality that counter hegemonic histories and retrieves the “truth” of those who have been neglected marginalized silenced; thus in its own specific way, it contributes to general knowledge. This “truth” emerges from the many of first person memoirs and diaries of people who went through Partition, from the interviews to writers or activists who lived through the turmoil of Independence, from the work of such social historians as Urvashi Butalia, Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon and others who have based their studies of Partition on oral testimonies despite the awareness of their difficult position as “gatherers” however emphatic they may be----- of painful memories which do not exactly fit into the frames of history, and which can be incomplete, contradictory, but fundamental to acquire what Butalia calls an “extremely important perspective on history”. All memory can contribute to redress our understanding of Partition, after all as Edward Said wrote, “memory is not necessarily authentic, but rather useful.”

It has been argued that art, better than any other language can express the unresolved burdens of the past. Thus the kind of memory that would allow the representations of the horror of unspeakable experiences is what Marianne Hirsch calls postmemory: “Postmemory

is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation.” Fiction unlike history normally has an added value: “the realm of fiction is essentially a meeting ground of opposites, of contraries ----- a space large enough to accommodate competing versions of truth.” In the light of this perspective “the imaginative truths” of literature can rightfully sit “at the roundtable of knowledge”. Since the years immediately following the Partition, fiction before any other type writing, has attempted to bring to the surface the brutality of the fratricidal division, so much so that an eminent historian of Partition, Mushirul Hasan, has included short stories and extracts from novels in his publications, convinced as he is that fiction “lends [.....] a human and realistic touch to Partition studies.” Literature, unconcerned with ideologies, has rendered the physical, psychological and emotional dimension of the human experience, has told us what people said or felt or remembered, thus filling the interstices and the erasures of official histories.

Being born in the sixties Shauna Singh Baldwin can be counted as belonging to the third generation after the Partition of India. Therefore, having no direct experience of the event, she has been repeatedly asked for the reasons why she decided to set her first novel in that historically distant background. In several interviews and essays she declares that her choice was dictated by the sense that “there is something missing”, that “a huge gap in the universe of possible narratives” still has to be filled; considering that scanty number of fictions in English on the subject, she adds that ‘there will never be enough novels to tell the tales’ of the millions of people who suffered the trauma of Partition. As a writer she feels the need to “look at areas of silence in culture and history and try to look past the privileged narratives of the past.” Countless histories have been written, but they all put forth different truths----- often disagreeing even on numbers----so, in Baldwin’s opinion “the first step to understanding Partition is to realize that Satya (Truth) is a fictional character.” Fiction’s added value in treating such controversial issues lies in the fact that it can interrogate history through “multiple points of views”. Her challenge she claims was to write her story from the point of view of Sikh women and thus reliance on oral narration was essential to make up for the gaps left by official histories, to dig up what was silent and forbidden and repressed in the subconscious. Women were particularly affected by the conflicts and trauma spawned by the Partition of the country, she puts women in the foreground

and claims that *What the Body Remembers* is the first book to explore Sikh women's experience during Partition.

What the Body Remembers is set largely in present Pakistan mainly in Rawalpindi and Lahore and some villages of Punjab. The story develops between 1928 and 1947. The central character is Roop who is portrayed from childhood to marriage, through the agonies of life as a second wife and a victim of Partition. Roop comes from a rural village; her father, a widowed *lambardar* impoverished by his wife's long illness and by his elder daughter's marriage agrees to give Roop to the village *jagirdar* who is also a powerful government bureaucrat Sardarji, a modern man who does not demand any dowry. At the time of marriage Roop is sixteen and her husband is twenty five years older to her. He already has a wife called Satya who is barren and thus the young bride is expected to bear children to maintain and propagate his lineage. Roop moves to Rawalpindi and starts life afresh with hopes expectations and dreams in her rich husband's sprawling haveli but she is tortured and victimized by the petty vengeance of her husband's first wife who constantly criticizes her while contradicting her husband's political opinions. Sardarji is too busy in his career and the impending trauma about to affect the country to bother about domestic politics and Satya does manage to get Roop sent away to her father's house. But her husband does realize later that the Muslim majority of his father-in-law's village and the services of army officer brother-in-law might prove useful for him and so he brings Roop back to start life afresh with her and their two children in Lahore, leaving Satya behind in Rawalpindi. Ultimately Satya reconciles and asks forgiveness from Roop while she is on her death-bed. When Partition is announced, Roop leaves for Delhi with her children while her husband stays back in Lahore to the last minute to work out a sensible proposal for the Radcliff Boundary Commission. With a resolution unknown to her before, she undergoes a traumatic journey through the midst of despondency, desolation, in constant fear for the life of her and her family in Delhi, a city disfigured by riots and the cry and plight of refugees. She hunts for her husband who has failed to join her. In the process of hunting for her husband she discovers several people of her paternal family, her neighbours in her father's village and many of Sikhs she has once known. When her husband finally reaches India he is a shattered, he has lost his properties and his dream of a unified modern nation.

What the Body Remembers is a novel about conflicts whose memory is accumulated in the flesh of men, women and peoples as a kind of “genetic inheritance”. Baldwin narrated a collective memory which goes back to ancient enmities and resurfaces in the event of the Partition, and womens’ memory whose bodies----- a constructed metaphor of the body of the country----- carry the marks of gender opposition, stretching into the most hideous form of the context of creation of two independent nations. Baldwin seems to suggest that what the body remembers is difficult to eradicate. History which informs peoples’ memory so deeply works its way into the narration of Baldwin’s story by means of a literary device which has the multiple function of allowing the author to introduce actual facts immediately preceding Independence and leading to Partition, to direct on them an impartial but participating eye, and to convey the idea that a higher force presides over the events. This force takes the fictional shape of Vayu the wind-god whose image recurs throughout the novel. It blows through time and space bringing news and stirring memories, it is in fact a symbolic representation of “what the body remembers” a centuries old collective memory that once kindled is propagated like a fire spread by wings. Travelling around the country, Vayu cannot but gather pictures, sounds and smells of unrest and hostility, take them around and give them back as they are, thus feeding more and hostility.

[.....] though vayu rushes across continents, blows hard and strong as he can, the wind-god only fans passion to flame, ignites the long fuse of memory till it sparks through the blood of men who fight for land. [...] The breeze from his efforts fans his Hindu followers and the followers of the Prophet back and forth, back and forth, doing nothing to cool them.”

Collective memory of past histories subsumes another kind of memory , that deriving from centuries of social customs, that deriving from centuries of social customs and shaping men’s and women’s relationships and roles; this memory embedded in the characters counterpoints historical memory. Thus private lives narrated in Baldwin’s novel assume a symbolical meaning in relation to national events. Another kind of memory is the one which dwells in the women’s bodies, collected from physical experience of past generations and from ancient stories. The men remain enmeshed in a memory of fears and divisions while the women in the novel through their memory lift the veil of silence thrown over the gendered violence of Partition: the use of the female body subjected to multilayered violence as it became used as a contending field between communities. The woman’s body and her memory becomes thus a

receptacle of a community's history and memory becomes a very significant vehicle of the crystallization of human experience and a vital trope of narration.