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**Through the Lens of Time:
The Partition in Krishna Sobti's Autobiography,
*From Gujrat, Pakistan, to Gujrat, India****

SUMMARY: In her latest book, *Gujrāt pakistān se gujrāt hindustān tak* (2017), Krishna Sobti (b. 1925), one of the best-known writers active on the Hindi literary scene, presents the reader with an autobiographical account focused on the events of 1947, where her personal experience of the Partition is reworked and presented in the guise of a novel. This paper proposes to analyse the stylistic devices (double frame approach, switching between the third-person and the first-person narratives, use of the dialogue, etc.) employed by the author to achieve her aim by drawing on the vast body of academic work on partition, violence, trauma and memory both in the local as well the global context.

KEYWORDS: Krishna Sobti, autobiography, partition, 1947, violence, trauma, memory

Alok Bhalla, one of the first scholars to analyze literary representations of the Partition in the *bhasha* literature,² starts his well-known and

* Sobti 2017a. So far there is no English translation of this book and my rendering of its Hindi title into English tries to keep close to the original. However, following “Afterward” in a very recent publication, under the rubric Further Reading there is this item: Sobti, Krishna. *A Gujarat Here, a Gujarat There*. Delhi: Penguin. (Introduced and translated by Daisy Rockwell) (Mastur 2018: 391). As there is no year of publication given, further scrutiny (of Penguin India website) reveals that the book is to be published in early 2019. Moreover, I would like to highlight the fact that throughout the paper I use the English version of personal names and surnames, especially of well-known personalities, as such versions of their names appear in the English-language books and printed media, hence Krishna Sobti instead of Kṛṣṇā Sobti.

² Alok Bhalla, a scholar and translator, focuses on literary works, mostly stories, in Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu.

often cited interview with Krishna Sobti with an observation which is followed by a question:

Most novels about the partition are autobiographical, drawing on personal memories. This raises an interesting question. What kind of language and tone does one use so that what is written is not merely a record of horror but an attempt to understand something of ourselves?¹

Not disputing Alok Bhalla's prefatory remarks, Krishna Sobti, who in 1947, when the Partition took place, was 22 years old, responds by placing her own writing and her post-Partition life alongside the writings and lives of other writers with similar, traumatic experience:

For my generation of writers, it [the Partition—MSP] was not so much a happening or a historical event but a living history, easily the most massive experience of a kind that became an encounter between man and reality, a collision between a political agenda and a long tradition of pluralism. Writers on both sides soon realized that after so much of hatred, violence and killings, human values had to be affirmed and restored. (Bhalla in Sen 1997: 55)

This statement is elucidated and personalized a couple of paragraphs later, still a part of Sobti's answer to the first question:

A novelist makes use of his or her experiences many years after the event. I am surprised that till recently I had not paid much attention to this fact. I had not realized it even when I reread my story *Sikka Badal Gaya* recently. I am not sure if I still understand the creative process. Maybe, earlier, I was much too close to the events. I was a part of them and didn't have the skills to deal with them. I did, however, sense even then that it was necessary to look beyond the immediate horror – that it was necessary to salvage something that remained untouched by violence. (ibid.: 56)

It seemed pertinent to quote extensively from this interview, basically a by-product of Bhalla's interest in the Partition writing, as it was one of the very first (if not the first) scholarly interviews with the writer

¹ Bhalla, "Memory and History: Krishna Sobti in Conversation with Alok Bhalla", in Sen 1997: 55.

to appear in English. The time it was published²—in 1997, the year that marked the 50th anniversary of Indian independence and is now viewed as the watershed in the academic studies on the Partition³—Krishna Sobti, though a well-known Hindi writer, was virtually unknown to the English-speaking world. As none of her novels had been yet translated into English, Anglophone readers had only her formidable reputation and a handful of stories to go on.

Krishna Sobti was born in 1925 in the town of Gujrat (now in Pakistan), and her childhood passed between her grandparents'⁴ ancestral havelis in rural Punjab, and her nuclear family homes in the capitals of Delhi and Shimla, where her father, a central government employee, was posted.⁵ She did her schooling in Shimla, at Lady Irwin School, and then joined Fatehchand College in Lahore. Her literary debut came in 1944 with a story called *Lāmā*, which was soon followed by another story, *Naftisā*.⁶ Sometime at the beginning of 1947 she travelled

² I know of five publications that contain this interview, of which three are in English, and two in Hindi: 1. as “Memory and History on the Partition” in *IIC Quarterly*, 24(2–3) Monsoon 1997: 55–79 (Bhalla 1997a); 2. as “Memory and History: Krishna Sobti in Conversation with Alok Bhalla” in: Sen 1997: 55–78; 3. as “Memory and History”, in Bhalla 2006; the third version is the most extensive; 4. as “Smṛti aur itihās. Ālok bhallā kī bātcī” in Sobti 2005: 121–143, tr. from English: Mukesh Kumār; 5. as “Smṛti aur itihās. Ālok bhallā kī bātcī” in Sobti 2018a: 29–48; both the Hindi texts are identical.

³ Incidents of communal violence, especially 1984 anti-Sikh riots, led to the re-examination of violence attending the Partition of India and the emergence of the independent Indian state. The 1990s saw the publications of such seminal works on the Partition as Butalia 1998, Menon and Bhasin 1998, Hasan 1995, and others.

⁴ Both maternal and paternal.

⁵ In the pre-independence India, the British government of India, with all its departments and employees, shifted in summer from Delhi to Shimla, known as the summer capital.

⁶ Both these stories are included in the story collection *Badlō ke ghere* (1980). In a recent interview with Trisha Gupta (1 September 2016, *Caravan*) Krishna Sobti gives same dates for *Lāmā* and *Naftisā* (1944); both

to Delhi, in time to celebrate her birthday which falls in February. She never went back to Lahore. 15 August 1947 found her, and her immediate family, in their government quarters near Connaught Place, right in the heart of the recently completed British New Delhi. Initially involved in work with the refugees, most probably women, for names such as Padmaja (Naidu) and Sarla (Behen) are mentioned,⁷ and thinking of pursuing, by and by, an M.A. course, Sobti ultimately decided to leave Delhi and take up a job in Sirohi Raj, a princely state on the border of Rajasthan and Gujarat. Though the job advertised for was to run a primary school, she eventually became a governess to the child Tej Singh, the maharaja of Sirohi. Her fictionalized autobiographical narrative, *From Gujrat, Pakistan, to Gujrat, India*, launched in January 2017 at the New Delhi World Book Fair⁸ when she was almost 92, revisits the two-years period (1950–1952) she spent in Sirohi. Prior to this book, Krishna Sobti has authored eight novels and/or novellas;⁹ a collection of short stories;¹⁰ three works of non-fiction

were published in the weekly *Vicār*, a leading literary magazine of the day (as Krishna Sobti tells her interviewers, Tarun Bhartiya and Jayeeta Sharma, *The Wordshmiths*, Katha, New Delhi); as for *Sikkā badal gayā* we have 1950 as given to Trisha Gupta, but in *Gujrāt pākistān se gujrat hindustān tak*, the protagonist, a stand-in for Krishna Sobti, gives the name of her first published story as *Sikkā badal gayā*; *Sikkā badal gayā* was published first in *Pratīk*, a magazine edited by Sachchidanada Vatsyayan Ageya.

⁷ Sobti 2017a: 54–55. The two women mentioned by name worked with women refugees, many of whom had been abducted and raped in the communal violence attending the Partition.

⁸ Hindi language publishers have a large presence at the Book Fair, with Rajkamal Prakashan, who publish Krishna Sobti's books, commanding usually the largest stall, followed by Vani Prakashan and others.

⁹ *Ḍār se bichuṛī* (1958), *Mitro marjānī* (1966), *Yārō ke yār* and *Tin pahār* (both in 1968), *Sūrajmukhī ādhere ke* (1972), *Zindagīnāmā* (1979), *Ai larḳī* (1991), *Samay sargam* (2000), *Dil-o-daniś* (2006), *Jainī maharbān simh* (2009). I group Sobti's fictional works under the rubric of novel/novella without getting into the debate. For the discussion of the genre of *Ai larḳī*, see Strelkova 2010.

¹⁰ *Badlō ke ghare* (1980).

(which include a memoir in the form of letters addressed to her niece, Sarwar;¹¹ a book of conversations with Krishna Baldev Vaid;¹² and a travelogue¹³) as well as three volumes of literary sketches.¹⁴ Soon after the publication of *From Gujrat, Pakistan, to Gujrat, India*, three more books have appeared bearing her name.¹⁵ Her extraordinary novel, *Zindagīnāmā*, published in 1979, brought her the 1980 Sahitya Akademi award for Hindi. She was the first woman to have received it in that language category and still only one of four.¹⁶ Though it is usual for Sahitya Akademi to publish the award-winning works in translation, both into other regional languages as well as English, this did not happen with *Zindagīnāmā*, probably due to its very complex idiom. Though eventually there were some *bhasha* translations,¹⁷ the novel did not become available to Anglophone readers until 2016.¹⁸ Writing soon after its publication in English Trisha Gupta notes:

Despite her enormous stature, only six of Sobti's books have been translated into English. We have come some distance from the 1990s, when her total inaccessibility outside Hindi allowed the well-informed editors of *Women Writing in India* to think that she wrote in a single dialect. Still, much of her work remains to be translated, and some of the existing efforts leave much to be desired. (Gupta 2016)

¹¹ *Śabdō ke ālok mē* (2005).

¹² *Sobti vaid samvād. Lekhan aur lekhak* (2007).

¹³ *Buddh kā kamaṇḍal laddākh* (2012).

¹⁴ *Ham Haśmat*, vol. 1—1977, vol. 2—1999, vol. 3—2012.

¹⁵ A book of literary criticism dedicated to Muktibodh: *Muktibodh: ek vyaktiv sahī kī talās mē* (2017); a selection of writing on Delhi excerpted from earlier works: *Mārfat Dillī* (2018); a book of interviews, *Lekhak kā jantrantr: Kṛṣṇa Sobti se sāḱṣātkār* (2018). Some interviews in the last book have been already published earlier in Hindi, for ex. in *Śabdō ke ālok mē*, while others have been specially translated from English for this volume.

¹⁶ The other three women writers for Hindi are: Alka Saroagi (2001), Mridula Garg (2013) and Nasira Sharma (2016). Sahitya Akademi awards are conferred since 1955.

¹⁷ Nirupama Dutt (Dutt 2016) mentions that noted Punjabi writer, Gurdial Singh (1926–2016), translated it into Punjabi and it was published in 1994.

¹⁸ Sobti 2016b; the original title is retained in the English translation.

The absence of Krishna Sobti from the seminal anthology *Women Writing in India*¹⁹ surprises today but this is how the editors had explained the omission then:

For volume 2, we wanted to include the work of Krishna Sobti, one of the leading contemporary Hindi writers, but she writes in a dialect [the] translators felt would be difficult to render into standard English and uses an earthy, lewd diction. Standard forms of English, sanitized as they have been over the last two hundred years, just did not stretch into anything that resembled the scope of Sobti's idiom. (Tharu and Lalita 1993: vol 2: xx–xxi)

Despite such an awkward beginning to her association with women's writing in India²⁰ and notwithstanding her complex relationship with the Hindi language, Krishna Sobti was read with great interest by stalwarts of Hindi literature and soon came to be considered one of its most important voices. Ravindra Kaliya (1938–2016) calls her “the princess of Hindi short story”.²¹ She is valued for her unique literary style; her loyalty to a very personal, Punjabi-infused Hindi diction (even though many find it at times difficult to follow²²); her choice of subjects; and the treatment of her unconventional women protagonists though “to abbreviate her work in terms of her birthplace (Punjab), gender (female) or choice of language is to fall for artificial categories.”²³ In 1996 she was nominated a Fellow of Sahitya Akademi²⁴ and in 2017 was presented with the Jnanpith Award,²⁵ the only

¹⁹ See: Tharu and Lalita 1993.

²⁰ In a more recent anthology of women's writing (Zaidi 2015) Krishna Sobti is represented by an excerpt from her novel *Sunflowers of the Dark*.

²¹ Kaliya 2015: 25: *vah jaise hindī kahānī kī rājkumārī thī*.

²² “Am reading *Zindaginama* (Krishna Sobti) now. Its language seems difficult, the meaning of words not clear. Then I read again and seem to follow the language better. Third time it is really easy, no problems. I feel happy” (Pushpa 2012: 231) (the translation is mine).

²³ See: Soni 2017.

²⁴ Sahitya Akademi Fellowships are conferred since 1968 for exceptional literary activities and at any given time there are just 21 Fellows.

²⁵ A literary award instituted in 1961 and conferred for the first time in 1965. It is given for ‘outstanding contribution to literature’ to Indian writers

second woman after Mahadevi Varma to be so honored. The Selection Board, in its announcement, stated that she had “immensely enriched Hindi literature by experimenting with new styles”.²⁶

Gujrāt pākistān se gujrāt hindustān tak has been variously described as a ‘novel’,²⁷ ‘a biographical novel’,²⁸ an ‘autobiographical novel’,²⁹ or an ‘autobiography’.³⁰ Being essentially a first-person narrative with an occasional shift to a third-person narrative and some additional dialogues thrown in, it could as easily have been termed plainly a novel³¹ but for its context. Given the context, with the basic facts matching the events in the life of the author, there can be no doubt in the mind of the reader that the protagonist is the young author herself. This belief is further strengthened by the subsequent interviews with Krishna Sobti, which lend weight to the supposition and confirm the claim. Supporting this line of thought are theoretical considerations of scholars such as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who in their essay, “The Trouble with Autobiography: Cautionary Notes for Narrative Theorists”, write:

Many decades of work on life writing have complicated our initial understanding of the autobiographical as such and revised our conceptualization of what happens and what is at stake in autobiographical acts. Self-representations and acts of self-narrating are always located, historical, subjective, political, and embodied.³²

writing in Indian languages included in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India and in English.

²⁶ “Hindi writer Krishna Sobti chosen for Jnanpith Award”. In: *The Hindu*, 3 Nov. 2017 (no attribution).

²⁷ “Her recent novel is ‘Gujrat Pakistan se Gujrat Hindustan’, the most autobiographical of her fiction” (Dutt 2017).

²⁸ Kuruvilla 2016. Hindi translation (by R. Chetankranti) of this conversation can be found in Sobti 2018a: 212–216 under the title: “Vibhājan aur āzādi ne hamē ek sāf dṛṣṭi dī thī”.

²⁹ See: Gupta 2016 and Bhardwaj 2017.

³⁰ “Krishna Sobti wins Jnanpith Award for her contribution to Hindi literature.” *Scroll.in*, 3.11.2017.

³¹ For the use of literary strategies in autobiographical writings see also Skakuj-Puri 2017.

³² Smith and Watson 2005: 357 in Phelan and Rabinowitz 2005.

Though numerous pieces of Sobti's earlier writings, for example some short stories or certain parts of her novellas, as well as her literary sketches (Browarczyk 2017: 140–154) could be called autobiographical, especially when taken in tandem with her recorded conversations or cross-referenced with her other non-fictional writings, *Gujrāt pākistān se gujrat hindustān tak* seems to be the very first work that is self-confessedly autobiographical.³³ It deals with a short and well-defined period of the author's life—some two years she had spent in self-exile, in Rajasthan. But for the initial first chapter that takes place in Delhi, the second chapter that is a poetic commentary on the horror of the times, and the closing pages of the book describing events when the protagonist is back in Delhi, the intermediate chapters are basically set in Sirohi. The only interludes from the sojourn there come in the form of work-related journeys to Bombay and Ahmedabad, where the author makes time to meet her extended family, now dispersed; and the last trip, with the young maharaja, to Dehradun and Musoorie. The family reunions provide windows that allow the author to embed the life-stories of her kin within the larger, mostly chronological, post-Partition narrative. As most of the embedded stories deal in one way or another with the Partition, which is also the event that hovers over the goings-on depicted in the first chapter and informs the narrator's decision to leave Delhi and take up a job in Sirohi, the whole book can thus be viewed as a memory project where the octogenarian writer revisits both her youth and the trauma of the Partition.

Krishna Sobti's late narrative venture into the past, possibly one of her last works on offer to the readers, with its well thought-out template and startlingly free of self-indulgent nostalgia, poses an interesting challenge to the scholar. Definitely a writing of a lifetime, but with its many bits and pieces already present or alluded to in earlier publications, and true to its author's belief in the economy of words,

³³ Nirmala Jain notes: "For a long time Krishna Sobti neither spoke nor wrote about her personal life openly." (*kṛṣṇā sobtī ne apnī nijī zindagī ke bāre mẽ kāfī samay tak khulkar na kuch kahā na likhā*) (Jain 2015: 20).

it offers a rare insight into a writerly reworking of the traumatic experience expounded in the earlier quoted interview with Alok Bhalla. When placed within the whole body of literary narratives on the Indian Partition, including now also those of the second and third generation writers and academicians, it provides a unique, very personal, but at the same time imbued with universal appeal, appraisal of traumatic events viewed from an almost seventy year-long perspective, a perspective very rare in the literary production in Hindi (and for that matter, English). In the Indian subcontinent such a perspective could not but have been influenced in some way by the often very engaged debates on the enterprise of nation-building, the issues of historical memory, the writing and re-writing of history, and last, but not least, the enduring impact of the Partition on the erstwhile refugees, especially women. With a writer of Krishna Sobti's stature, and given her position within the literary canon in India,³⁴ it becomes imperative to debate this work as well as her other writings within the larger framework of the global literature on the subject, where different area and theme studies underwrite each other. In the introduction to his study on the subject of partition, albeit in a non-Indian setting, Joe Cleary acknowledges the role the study of the Indian Partition has played in the study of similar events in other geographical locations. He writes:

Some of the finest literature on partition, and some of the most innovative historical theoretical research on the topic, has been written by writers and scholars of the Indian subcontinent. While Irish and Middle Eastern historiography continues to be dominated by the 'high' politics of partition, South Asian historians have begun to investigate the issue from the perspective of those 'below' as well. In so doing, critical new insights on the communal violence that accompanied partition, on the specific experiences of women, and on the role of literature in constructing collective understandings and representations of the traumas involved have been opened up. This South Asian scholarship is immensely suggestive to those interested in the history of partition anywhere (...).³⁵

³⁴ See: Cavalieri 2017.

³⁵ Cleary 2002. Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 186–187.

Building on Cleary's assessment of the partition literature, specifically the witness narratives and their literary manifestations, Anna Bernard contends: "(...) it is possible to identify distinct genres, plotlines, and esthetic modes within the category of partition literature, with specific reference to romance, the *Bildungsroman*, and the fragmented narrative" (Bernard 2010: 10). According to her, both the *Bildungsroman* and the fragmented narrative "seek to critically replicate the process through which the event of partition is memorized" (ibid.: 10–11), with fragmented narrative being "a stylistic rather than a plot category, defined by the use of any kind of episodic or disjunctive narration: spatial, temporal, generic, or perspectival" (ibid.: 23). She further proposes a twofold division within the last category, with the first sub-category to consist of narratives that "try to combat the experiential sense of fragmentation that partition has instigated by performing and then resolving it in the narrative itself" (ibid.), and the second—of narratives that are "distinguished by their refusal to connect their fragments".³⁶ Krishna Sobti's *Gujrāt pākistān se gujrāt hindustān tak* may be classified then as a fragmented narrative (though possibly with traces of the *Bildungsroman*), however, it is a matter of discussion whether it fits better within the first or the second sub-category.

Further, the long interval of time between the Partition violence and trauma on the one hand and the writing of the book, with its very well thought-out and rounded-off structure, on the other, make a strong case for placing Krishna Sobti's book in the first of the two mentioned sub-categories, and give its author the credit of having reworked the trauma within the narrative itself—which in a way she did. Having chosen to remove herself to a place far away from the familial setting of Delhi and the supportive presence of the family, thus compounding the misery of the exile which had already become her inalienable lot with the Partition of India and the forced departure from what she calls her

³⁶ Bernard 2010: 23. Saadat Hasan Manto's stories on Partition are placed by the author in this category.

homeland,³⁷ she ultimately returns to the capital after a lapse of some two years and makes a fresh start in the linguistically and culturally familiar surroundings. However, it might be pertinent to confess here that my first impulse was to opt for the second sub-category. This initial choice was supported by the fact that the narrative is disjoint and the fragments pertaining to the Partition are structurally disconnected by being interspersed with the account of the then narrative present or the goings-on centered on Sirohi (for even infrequent travels away from it were basically connected to the chores and duties at Sirohi, which largely unaffected by the Partition, did not revolve around it). When extracted from the whole and pursued in an unbroken sequence, the Partition-related fragments make for horrifying reading, but when encountered during the normal course of reading the book, the physical proximity and numerical abundance of the Sirohi narratives within the whole text moderate the horror and make the reading bearable. This very mature and skilled structural arrangement leaves no doubt that Krishna Sobti under no condition wanted to make an unmitigated statement comparable to that of Manto, neither in her earlier works, nor in this book.³⁸

³⁷ I use here the term *homeland* as a short-hand translation of the loaded Hindi/Urdu word *vatan*, especially when used by Krishna Sobti in the phrase *hubbulvatanī* or *love of one's homeland*.

³⁸ For Sobti's views on Manto and the admiration she had for his work, see her essay "Maṅṭo ko zindā hī sakmjhie kyōki maṅṭo zindā hai" in Sobti 1999b: 190–195; this essay has appeared earlier under the title "Kyōki maṅṭo zindā hai" in a 1989 book of extracts, both from the published works as well as the work in progress, *Sobti ek sohbat* (Sobti 2014c), in the section titled "Ham haśmat". This section, besides certain essays known already from *Ham haśmat* vol I (originally published in 1977), has a few essays which appeared later in *Ham haśmat* vol II (published 1999) and a few essays that never found themselves in any of the *Ham haśmat* volumes, including the third volume published in 2012. The essay "Dillī: naī-purānī" (Sobti 2014c: 327–346) contains certain paragraphs (including the opening ditty), which we find also scattered throughout *Gujrāt pākistān se gujrat hindustān tak*.

In one of her candid moments, speaking of her writing experience, Krishna Sobti reveals:

At times a piece of writing would refuse to germinate for years. On other occasions it happened that ready-to-write, raw subject-matter of a story or a novel, and its ‘texture’ were there at my fingertips. The same night the complete story would come to life right in front of (my) eyes.³⁹

Though written much before the publication of *Gujrāt pākistān se gujrāt hindustān tak*, this piece of information on a book that refuses to grow and assume its true form could easily be applied to this last title, which undoubtedly took decades to mature. Many of its narratives have already been used before, some in the form of an independent, remountaged compositions, others as a part of an earlier, bigger work. For example, the very short, heart-rending, terse story, “Don’t be afraid, I will protect you”,⁴⁰ acquires a fuller context in *Gujrāt pākistān se gujrāt hindustān tak* where the spectre of Bimbo, a childhood friend, visits the narrator in a haunting dream, addresses her by her childhood name, Kishni, and recounts her tale of woe: on the wedding night she and her newly-wed husband were attacked by a slogan-shouting, blood-thirsty mob, which took her away, chopped off her arms still adorned with wedding bangles, and finally killed her (Sobti 2017a: 103–104). Some twenty pages later Bimbo’s personal narrative is supplemented by her mother’s point-of-view account of what transpired, once again related by the narrator in the garb of an impending, nightmarish dream (Sobti 2017a: 120–121). Nightmares seem to plague the narrator every time she closes her eyes, in her own bed, during train-travel,

³⁹ *barsō kōi racnā ugne kā nām nahī letī. kāī bār aisā huā ki kuch likhne ke lie kisī kahānī-upanyās kā kaccā māl, uskā ‘tekšcar’ hāth kī porō māī mahsūs kiyā. usī rāt yah bhī huā ki pūrī-kī-pūrī kahānī ākhō ke āge zindā hoī calī gāī* (Sobti 2012 E: 257). All translations from Hindi to English by Maria Skakuj-Puri unless otherwise specified.

⁴⁰ Sobti 2006a: 115–116; it is a two-page long story, “Daro mat, māī tuhm-hārī rakṣā karūgā” / *Don’t be afraid, I will protect you in Bādlō ke ghere / Surrounded by Clouds*. As noted on p. 116, this story was written in October 1950.

in fact whenever her weary eyelids droop. Anything and everything triggers the memory. At one point, when the sight of a young couple on the train is about to set her mind off onto the thought of what happened to Bimbo, she fights back the sleep to stop the descent into another restless, ghost-haunted dream:

She wiped her eyes with the edge of her dupatta and pushed the dream back to Pakistan. Dream, get away, go back! What is the need to disguise yourself as someone here to spy on from over there! I have paid all my debts, there is nothing left.⁴¹

Moreover, a brief, very cryptic reference to the same event appears right at the beginning of the book, embedded in a passage describing the refugees pouring into Delhi:

All those beaten down people and their bundles, trussed-up belongings, old, discolored trunks, tied-up odds and ends, stained, dirty dupattas, faces—faces burning with impotent hate—faces disfigured by cold, animal loathing; some holding tight onto the memory of the face of a lost young son, *others still [seeing in their mind's eye] the trashing of the bridal bangles on a daughter's wrists till they turn into a bloody tattoo —oh, God—her arms!* —somebody remembering old parents left behind —homes turned into madhouses—all because of politics! The whole city filled with human beings driven out of their homes.⁴²

⁴¹ *usne dupaṭṭe ke chor se ākhē pōchī aur sapne ko pākistān kī aur dhakel diyā. sapno, jāo vahī jāo. yahā bhes badalkar vahā tāk-jhākh karne se kyā phāyḍā! merī aur se koī udhār bākī nahī* (Sobti 2017a: 120). It is pertinent to note that the phrase *bhes badalnā* besides the obvious meanings (changing clothes, putting on disguise) may also refer to assuming another body on rebirth. Similarly, ‘here’ and ‘there’ besides referring simply to a terrestrial, geographical location (here—India, there—Pakistan) stand also for the present life on earth and the Hereafter.

⁴² *hāre hue yah sab aur aur unke bucke, poṭliyā, badrang purānī sandūkiyā, gaṭhriyā, maile-adhmaile dupaṭṭe, cehre—piṭī huī nafrat se tapte hue—koī thaṇḍī huī khūkhār nafrat se niḍhāl, koī javān beṭe ke bichure cehre ke sāth saṭā—koī beṭī ke rāngle cūrō par salākhō ko gondte hue—hāy o rabbā—uskī bāhē—koī pīche chūṭ gae būrhe mā-bāp ko yād kartā—gharō ko pagalkhānā banā diyā—siyāsat ne. sārā śahar bharā hai āpne-āpne*

The short sentence related to Bimbo's death (but also to the deaths of all other girls who lost their lives in similar circumstances) conjures up the image not only of the abduction and rape, but also seems to indirectly suggest that the hapless parents who survived the massacre were left with the body of their daughter (hence the detailed depiction based on the actual viewing) and had to cremate it, maybe even within the house compound, as it would not have been possible to take it to the cremation ground (this was a frequent occurrence during the riots brought on by the Partition as certain areas and roads would be controlled by one, while the others, by another community). Further, the body of a married woman, whose husband is still alive (thus a *suhāgin*) is usually dressed for the cremation in her bridal clothes or at least covered with her bridal veil (even if she is old). Here, horror of horrors, the young bride goes to her funeral pyre still dressed in her wedding attire. The story, "Don't be afraid, I will protect you", provides further gory details: the arms were cut off to get to the girl's gold bangles.⁴³

Similarly, the narrative presented earlier in "Sikkā badal gayā"/"Times have changed"⁴⁴ re-surfaces, re-worked, in *Gujrāt pākistān se gujrāt hindustān tak*. The travails of Shahni encountered also as one of the chief protagonists of *Zindagīnāmā* and whose character was based on Sobti's grandmother/s, are provided now with a larger, factual backdrop given in a very matter-of-fact voice. We read:

Dadi was at the Emanabad farm. She ran through the fields and reached Rōdhi Sahab gurdwara at night. Younger chacha, Balraj, got left behind. His

gharō se phenke gae logō se (Sobti 2017a: 12). The italics in the English text are mine.

⁴³ *Aah! One flash of blade and severed, gold-adorned arms fell to the ground. hāy—ek dhār camkī aur sone se bharī bāhē kaṭkar nīce gir paṛī* (Sobti 2006a: 116).

⁴⁴ "Sikkā badal gayā" in Sobti 2006a: 134–140, translated into English by Jaidev and published in Bhalla 2012: Vol 4: 255–261, under the unchanged title "Sikka Badal Gaya". The very idiomatic title, referenced also in the text, has proved so far impossible to translate adequately.

legs would not move because of fear. The gun kept at the farm was of no use either. Meanwhile, the mob kept on advancing towards the farm. Maulu, who realized what was happening, got the chacha off the rooftop, hid him in a sack and put the sack on his back. Covering his head and shoulders with a blanket, he carried chacha to his shack. His wife planted herself in front of the mud-stove to cook while Maulu joined the mob in pillage and murder. It was already late night when the crowd dispersed and Maulu once again swung the sack hiding chacha onto his back and taking the back route through the fields reached Roḏhi Sahab gurudwara.

Dadi showered Maulu with her blessings while chacha took out from his pocket the cloth wrapped gun-license and handed it over to Maulu.

Maulu! Give me your hand and take the keys to the stores. Listen, this is my order—now the land and the house are yours. Don't let anybody take it away from you, lad.

Maulu touched dadi's feet and disappeared in the darkness.⁴⁵

This image begs to be juxtaposed with the image of Sobti's maternal grandmother, who came to India with a refugee caravan and by the time of the narrator's brief visit to Bombay has been reduced to an infirm, old woman clutching praying beads in her hand (Sobti 2017a: 141–143).

⁴⁵ *dādī emnābād vāle fārm par thī. khetō kī rāh bhāgī aur ādhī rāt roḥī sāhib gurudvāre pahūcī./choṭe cacā kalrāj vahī chūṭ gae the. dard se unkī ṭāg jurī thī. fārm par rakhī bandūk unke kisī kām na ā sakī. bhīṛ fārm kī or barh rahī thī. khabar pā maulū ne cacā cabāre se utārā. borī mē ḍāl apne kādhe par uṭhā liyā. sir ko khes se dhāk apnī jhuggī mē ḍāl āyā. gharvālī cūlhe ke āge baiṭhī roṭī-sālan pakātī rahī aur maulū bhīṛ ke sāth lūṭ-mār mē śāmil rahā. rāt der gae jab bhīṛ titar-bitar ho gai to maulū ne cacā kā borā-buckā kādhe par ḍālā aur khetō ke bīc se hokar roḥī sāhib jā phūcā./dādī ne maulū ko asīsē ḍā aur cacā ne kamīz kī jeb se rūmāl nikāl maulū kī or bandūk kā lāisens barhā diyā—maulū apnā hāth idhar karo aur bhaṅḍārghar kī yah lo tāliyā—kaul karār samjho, āj se fārm aur ghar tumhārā huā. barkhurdār kisī aur ke hāth mē na jāne denā./maulū ne dādī ko pairīpaunā bulāyā aur ādhere me oḥhal ho gayā* (Sobti 2017a: 29–30). In an interview with Kamāl Ahmad (Sobti 2005: 326–340) Krishna Sobti talks about her *nānī*, who did not want to leave the village and who was finally, like Shahni in “Sikkā badal gayā”, escorted to a refugee camp by her late husband's friend, and about her dadi, who ran away from the Emnabad farm to the safety of the Roḏhi Sahab gurudwara. This interview can be also found in Sobti 2018a: 136–148.

However, when the family goes for a picnic on the beach, the narrator recounts how her uncle gently cajoles his sister and the protagonist's maternal grandmother (*nānī*) to sit on the rocks and allow the sea to bathe her: "You were used to bathing every morning in the river, it will lift your spirits" (*har roz dariyā mẽ nahāne vālā tumhārā dīl paraç jāyegā*) (Sobti 2017a: 152). The strikingly tender turn of the Hindi phrase conveys a host of emotions—love, anguish, care—all focused on the old woman whose world has been turned upside-down. There is nothing but this brief depiction of the sea-side scene to bear witness to her earlier, well-moored life referenced in the opening passage of the 1950 short story mentioned above, "Sikkā badal gayā" / "Times have changed", where we see her alter ego at the riverbank, at dawn:

Shahni slipped out of her clothes placing them to one side, and chanting "Shri...Ram, Shri...Ram", stepped into the water. Filling her cupped palms with water she offered it to the sun, splashed her drowsy eyes and let her body submerge in the river.⁴⁶

I would like to wrap up the discussion of the texts on *lend*⁴⁷ with one last example, this time relating to the narrator's reminiscences of her pre-Partition life in Lahore. I refer here to a fragment that appeared earlier in Sobti's other autobiographical book, *Śabdō ke ālok mẽ / In the Glow of Words*,⁴⁸ to be reprinted, almost verbatim (the only significant changes are in the punctuation and spacing of paragraphs/dialogues) in *Gujrāt pākistān se gujrāt hindustān tak*.⁴⁹ The passage starts with the words, "My birthday was in February",⁵⁰ and recounts the narrator's birthday

⁴⁶ *śāhnī ne kapṛe utārkar ek or rakhe aur 'śrīrām, śrīrām' kartī pānī mẽ ho lī. ājali bharkar sūrya devtā ko namaskār kiyā, apnī unīdī ākhō par chīṭṭe diye aur pānī se lipaṭ gayī.* "Sikkā badal gayā" in Sobti 2006a: 134.

⁴⁷ I mean here the texts or fragments of texts borrowed by the author from his/her earlier works.

⁴⁸ See: Sobti 2005.

⁴⁹ In *Śabdō ke ālok mẽ* on pp. 88–95, in *Gujrāt pākistān se gujrāt hindustān tak* on pp. 105–115.

⁵⁰ *pharwarī mẽ merā janamdin thā.* Most probably the birthday celebration would have taken place in 1946, much before the onset of communal

celebrations in Lahore, on the bank of Ravi. There is a boat ride and merrymaking, with the usual singing and recitations of poetry. The narrator recites a stanza from Pandit Narendra Sharma's⁵¹ poem: "Those apart today, who knows when will they meet again..." (*āj ke bichure na jāne kab milēge*), which when read in the post-Partition scenario betrays the feeling of a prescient nostalgia. Moreover, the earlier account found in *Śabdō ke ālok mē/In the Glow of Words* has an additional sentence missing in the later work—"I never happened to be on the bank of Ravi on my birthday again",⁵² acting as a sort of answer to the last sentence of the preceding paragraph (present in both publications), "I was sad for who knows if I will be able to come here, on this day, again!" (*udās thī ki kyā patā phir isī din yahā ānā ho, na ho!*)

Having analyzed a couple of examples to show that virtually the whole body of Krishna Sobti's writing references itself time and again, I would venture to propose that her latest book has been structured like a labyrinthine web which Deleuze and Guattari⁵³ would compare to a rhizome.⁵⁴ "The rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite" (Eco 1985: 57). So is Krishna Sobti's whole oeuvre.

However, besides formal connections based on specific events or the use of protagonists modeled on actual persons drawn from the author's personal life, there is at least one more aspect of Krishna Sobti's writing that knits her literary oeuvre closely together while simultaneously lending affect to the autobiographical composition at

riots, for we know that in February 1947 Krishna Sobti was already in Delhi.

⁵¹ Pandit Narinder Sharma (1913–1989) was a poet and a well-known songwriter for Bollywood films.

⁵² *apne janamdin par phir kabhī māī rāvē kināre na huī.*

⁵³ See: "Introduction: Rhizome" in Deleuze and Guattari: 3–28.

⁵⁴ A rhizome is, in botany, a usually underground, horizontal stem of a plant that often sends out roots and shoots from its nodes. Rhizomes may also be referred to as rootstalks.

hand. I am going to treat the matter very briefly here and to that end would like to examine the opening pages of *Gujrāt pākistān se gujṛāt hindustān tak*. The very first unnumbered and untitled chapter opens with a sing-song chant:

Trumpet and drum, hoysha,
 Yes, yes, my brother, hoysha,
 The dues were collected, hoysha,
 The blood has been shed, hoysha,
 He climbed the gallows, hoysha,
 Was martyred alright, hoysha,
 Trumpet and drum, hoysha,
 Now rule will be ours, hoysha,
 The crown will be ours, hoysha,
 Government will be ours, hoysha,
 Trumpet and drum, hoysha.⁵⁵

Committed readers of Krishna Sobti's work would have already encountered this chant with its veiled reference to Bhagat Singh⁵⁶ in an earlier piece of writing which provides an insight both into the author's creative thrust and the context on the chant's use.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *turhī nigāṛā hoiśśā/ o mere bhāi hoiśśā/ hūi kamāi hoiśśā/ khūn bahāyā hoiśśā/ caṛh gae phāśī hoiśśā/ hue śahīd hoiśśā/ turhī nigāṛā hoiśśā/ ab rāj milegā hoiśśā/ tāj milegā hoiśśā/ sarkār milegī hoiśśā/ turhī nigāṛā hoiśśā* (Sobti 2017a: 9).

⁵⁶ Bhagat Singh (1907–1931), a revolutionary figure of Indian independence movement; tried, convicted and hanged for killing a British officer; known also as 'shahid' or 'martyr'; hero of many ballads and tales in Punjabi.

⁵⁷ Refer to the footnote no. 44 above. In the essay "Dillī: nāi-purānī" (Sobti 2014c: 327–346) we have the chant with its original context (Sobti 2014c: 331) as reported by the author, followed by a proto-narrative of the events surrounding the Partition and the Independence reworked later in *Gujrāt pākistān se gujṛāt hindustān tak*. The first, four-and-half-page long chapter of *Gujrāt pākistān se gujṛāt hindustān tak* finds itself also at the opening of a piece of writing titled "Turhī nigāṛā hoī śā" in Sobti's recent book (Sobti 2018b: 35–50). Note two different spellings: *hoiśśā* in *Gujrāt pākistān se gujṛāt hindustān* and *hoī śā* in "Turhī nigāṛā hoī śā".

Reading now its new, pared down, ascetic version—reading it aloud and in the original—we find ourselves drawn, unwittingly and surreptitiously, into another world: we hear and then see, in our mind’s eye, a group of laborers hauling a heavy roll of electrical cable down the road, laboriously synchronizing their movements with a rhythmic chant. The voices float in the air, enter the room. “The throbbing longing and immediacy of the Punjabi ditty bouncing back and forth in the afternoon wretchedness”⁵⁸ sweeps over the protagonist transporting her back to her Lahore hostel from the place near the window of her present home (in the yet unnamed location). By and by we learn more about the place, the time and the actors: judging from their diction the laborers are from the east Punjab (Lahore? Its whereabouts? What brought them here?); the simple rendition tugs at the protagonist’s heart-strings and unlocks a flood of (barely held back?) memories and associations (both at the narrative as well as the retrospective level); the narrator herself is an exile; and yet another group of people is about to embark on a journey that would take them away from their home: “The booming voices of the receding ‘hoysa’ merged with the sound of horse-hoofs”⁵⁹ marking the departure of the next-door neighbours, we read. Thus within the space of a few sentences we are succinctly informed that certain cataclysmic forces seem to be at work forcing people to leave their homes; that some of those displaced are from eastern Punjab (as attested by their accent) with the protagonist somehow identifying with them; that at the same time there are people leaving Delhi to travel in the opposite direction and they are Muslim; that the exodus has engulfed all social classes; and that this turn of events is breaking the most intimate bonds. Moreover, the whole passage masterfully sets forth the protagonist-cum-narrator’s position vis-a-vis the situation and reveals her point of view, which informs

⁵⁸ *udās-sī dupahriyā ko gūjāte hubbulvatanī ke ye bol mājhilī ke tan-badan ko lahrā gae* (Sobti 2017a: 9).

⁵⁹ *dūr hotī‘ hoiśśā’ kī ghanilī āvāz ke sāth sahsā ghore kī t̄āp milkar (...)* (Sobti 2017a: 9).

the whole book. Very telling is the use of the word *hubbulvatanī* meaning ‘the love of one’s homeland’.⁶⁰ It is a Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani version of the Arabic *hubb-ul-vatan* and the author’s recourse to this particular usage shows a need to use a word which would stand out, refuse to be lost between other common sounding words or have its impact watered down. Other words or phrases could have been used, for example, *māṭrbhūmī kā pyār* or *vatanprastī*, the first meaning ‘love of the motherland’, the other ‘worship of the native land’ though now usually translated simply as ‘patriotism’. The author, however, most probably needed the love component to be like the love a lover might have had for his lost beloved, with the word itself not threadbare with use. Be that as it may, usually it is the everyday and the familiar that acts as the cultural marker or clue.

Starting with a brief but insightful analysis of Meera Syal’s autobiographical novel *Anita and Me*,⁶¹ which is a narrative of a Punjabi girl growing up in England (and whose parents as well as their friends have lived through the Partition), and then moving on to the post-memorial elements embedded in the second generation’s cultural productions (both in India and the diaspora), Ananya Jahanara Kabir analyses “the circulation of Punjabi cultural capital” in which, she contends, “crucial role has been played by different genres of music” (Kabir 2004: 172–189). She writes: “I read music as a text in order to elaborate upon that which Meera Syal hints at: music’s affective

⁶⁰ I have encountered one more use of this term, *hubbulvatanī*, by Krishna Sobti (Sobti 1999a: 142) though I am sure there are more in her oeuvre. There is an interesting exposition on the use of the term *vatan*, given by Krishna Sobti in her interview with Kamāl Ahmad. She says: “You will find it interesting to know that before the Partition [terms such as] *vatan* and *des* were used to denote a regional entity. There would be letters coming from the *des* and people would go to the *des* for holidays.” (*āpko dīlcasp lagegā yah jānnā kī bāṭvāre se pahle ‘vatan’ aur ‘des’ kṣetṛīy ikāiyō ke liye istemāl hotā thā. Des se cīṭṭī āī thī to log chuṭṭī des jāte the*) (Sobti 2005: 326).

⁶¹ See Syal 1996.

power to wrench out of the ordinary and the quotidian, the very wellsprings of loss” (ibid.: 175).

In the opening sequence of *Gujrāt pākistān se gujrāt hindustān tak*, the simple Punjabi ditty wrenches the young protagonist locked-in in the immediacy of the post-Partition moment out of the carefully constructed though yet unstable mental refuge (‘place of safety’⁶²) while the author-turned-narrator for whom the protagonist is a stand-in, embedded more securely in the removed-from-the-traumatic-event present, surveys the time-capsule instant: she again hears the sing-song intonation, feels the touch of the summer afternoon languor (it is once more August, 1947) and is overwhelmed by the rush of memories brought on by the sensory recall. Unsurprisingly, the narration is in the third person allowing for a detached survey of an emotional moment. The use of masterful, stylistic devices, here and further on in the novel, again and again prevents the narrative from slipping into the merely sentimental. “The cultural and historical layers dredged up through musical recall” (Kabir 2004: 182) do assault both the protagonist-cum-narrator and the reader but the whole is mediated by the sense of successfully reworked memories of the Partition trauma and violence. Of such an accomplishment in reworking the trauma Ananya Jahanara Kabir writes:

The transformation of traumatic memory into musical postmemory suggests that memory can become “a repository of the sublime” (Van Alphen 1997: 195) only when that which is remembered is not embedded within an overt narrative. The spatial and conceptual possibilities of diaspora encourage this freeing from story. (Kabir 2004: 183)

Though referring basically to the diaspora, the statement can be applied to Krishna Sobti’s latest autobiographical work as well. Never one to speak of her personal experience in a hurry and always careful to present a literary re-worked, well-balanced though still painful reading of the Partition, she manages, as *Gujrāt pākistān se gujrāt hindustān tak*

⁶² Smith and Watson call it ‘a place of rescue’, see Smith and Watson 2012: 614.

shows, to avoid both too graphic a telling or a telling that would appear too detached. By choosing a personal frame located in the past but not concurrent with the upheaval, she skillfully weaves two distinct temporalities into a single narrative and succeeds in showing sensibilities of the protagonist (but also her younger self) filtered through the lens of time. One could venture to say that to achieve this end she consciously builds up a post-memory-like effect by using numerous narrative devices (musical recall, fragmented narrative, transferring of the protagonist's and thus author-narrator's own feelings onto an object to void the affective,⁶³ etc.) creating thus a piece of an autobiographical writing⁶⁴ portent with grief which yet does not read like a witness account but a story or a novel, its authenticity intact.

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⁶³ This is how the suitcase belonging to the narrator traveling to Sirohi and getting off on a desolate station is described: *A tiny hamlet comes into view. I pull out the luggage lying abjectly below the seat and peer through the window. (chuṭpuṭ bastī dīkhne lagī thī. sīt ke nīce dubkā sahmā paḍā sāmān khīcā aur khīḍkī se bāhar juḍā dī.)* (Sobti 2017a: 22). For the materiality of objects in the narratives of memory and loss in the context of Punjab see Murphy 2012 and Malhotra 2017.

⁶⁴ I use the term 'autobiographical writing' in the sense proposed by Lambert-Hurley 2018: 55.

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