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How to Speak of the Unspeakable?

Narratives of Violence Against Women in Hindi Novels about Partition[1]

ABSTRACT: To date generations of people from South Asia grapple with traumatic experiences of havoc and violence prior to, during and in the aftermath of the Partition of British India. Writings in Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, and English, i.e. in languages spoken in the regions mostly affected by the turmoil of 1947, reflect the painful process of coming to terms with these experiences and of possible reconciliation with consequences of "the long shadow of partition" (Bhutalia 2015). Violence against women, often gruesome and unspeakable, was a facet of the Partition that occurred repeatedly but whose testimony and records were either censored and/or silenced by survivors and newly established states for diverse individual, communal and "nation-building" reasons (Bhutalia 1998). In my paper I would like to examine how Hindi novels dating from the end of the 1950s to 2016 narrate instances of partition violence against women. With focus on Yashpal's *Jhūṭhā sac* of 1958, Bhishm Sahni's *Tamas* of 1974 and Krishna Sobti's *Gujrāt pākistān se gujrāt hindustān tak* of 2016 I scrutinize various

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narrative strategies used by the authors to review and retell instances of violence against women during the partition.

KEYWORDS: partition, violence against women, Hindi novels, Hindi literature

The 'truth' of the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 lay, at least for its victims, in the violence done to them.

Pandey 1997: 2037

Partition: Intergenerational retellings

Kamala Khan aka Ms. Marvel is the first super-hero of a migrant Pakistani Muslim origin to be featured in the popular comic series by Marvel. She is the main protagonist of the 2014 comic book, *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal*, and its sequels, as well as the American television miniseries (2022) of the same name.[2] Remarkably, her superpowers originate in one of the darkest chapters of the modern history of South Asia, i.e., the partition of British India into India and Pakistan. In the TV episode 5 titled "Time and Again," scripted by Fatimah Asgarh and directed by Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, the protagonist relocates into a scene depicting the 1947 mayhem: she looks at a crowd of people holding on to their children and belongings and desperately trying to get onto an already overflowing train to leave the newly constituted India for the newly constituted Pakistan. Many scenes such as this are conspicuously present in the survivors' testimonies, literature,

[2] *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal* (2014), script by G. Willow Wilson, drawings by Adrian Alphona, Jake Wyatt, cover by Sara Pichelli; *Ms. Marvel* directed by Adil El Arbi, Bilall Fallah, Meera Menon, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy and written by G. Willow Wilson, Bisha K. Ali at al. was aired on Disney+ in 2022, cf. Mateen and Meryl 2022. An earlier example of narrating post-memory of the partition is an anthology of graphic narratives curated and edited by Ghosh (2013) titled *This Side, That Side: Restoring Partition.* The graphic stories in mixed medias are created by younger generation of artists and writers from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

and cinematography on the partition.[3] As the director, Obaid-Chinoy, explains,

> I was looking for iconic images that would be emblematic of the pain, the horror, the despair people felt when they were leaving their homes. I wanted to transport audiences right into that time—what people were carrying with them, the body language, the look on their faces. (Mateen and Meryl 2022)[4]

Both Asgarh and Obaid-Chinoy, creatively responsible for the partition episode of *Ms. Marvel*, come from India and Pakistan and have either migrated or are partly working in the USA and Canada respectively. Their pop-cultural picturization of the post-memory (Hirsch 1997) related to the horrors of the Indian and the Pakistani pasts thus turns into a narrative that spans generations and continents. The very fact that a pop-cultural narrative with a global reach manages to weave formative experiences of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh into the global mainstream is potent.

Urvashi Butalia, the author of *The Other Side of Silence. Voices from the Partition of India,* one of the first textual ventures focused on collecting oral testimonies of the survivors, but also the perpetrators of violence,[5] epitomizes the event's scale and enormity,

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[3] Cf. Singh 2006. The cover of the special edition of Khushwant Singh's classic novel, *Train to Pakistan*, of 2006 (first edition in 1956) carries an iconic photograph by Margaret Bourke-White, an American photographer, whose photographs of partition appeared in leading magazines of the time (e.g., *Life*). The 2006 edition of Singh's novel marked the fiftieth anniversary of its publication and showcased many of Bourke-White's photos.

[4] The voices heard on the audio-track of the train station scene are drawn from oral histories collected by the Citizen's Archives of India and of Pakistan: https://www.citizensarchiveofindia.org.

[5] It is noteworthy that Butalia's interest in testimonies of the partition violence was prompted by the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. Butalia was working as a volunteer in the refugee camps and many survivors of the harrowing events would have recalled the trauma of 1947, cf. Butalia 1998.

> The political partition of India caused one of the greatest human convulsions of history. Never before or since have so many people exchanged their homes and countries so quickly. In the space of a few months, about twelve million people moved between the new, truncated India and the two wings, East and West, of the newly created Pakistan. By far the largest proportion of these refugees—more than ten million of them—crossed the western border which divided the historic state of Punjab, Muslims travelling west to Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs east to India. Slaughter sometimes accompanied and sometimes prompted their movement; many others died from malnutrition and contagious diseases. Estimates of the dead vary from 200,000 (the contemporary British figure) to two million (a later Indian estimate) but that somewhere around a million people died is now widely accepted. As always there was widespread sexual savagery: about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own (and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion). (Butalia 1998: 3)

In a later publication titled tellingly *Partition: The Long Shadow*, Butalia (2015: xviii) continues the trope and comments on the post-memory of trauma in the following words,

> Nor does the trauma stop after one generation, for in the absence of psychiatric and counselling services for the survivors, many traumatic memories lingered and were passed on to the next generation. (…) The long shadow that Partition cast, touched not only those who lived through it, and those who died because of it, but also the generations that came after.

It is mainly because of this lingering shadow—both a direct and an indirect consequence of the various manifestations of violence—that the intragenerational involvement with the traumatic events of 1947 continues today.[6] Take, for instance, a series of initiatives set in motion

[6] Das (1995: 192–193): (…) "no public space was created in which society could confront the event, in which it could hear from women the nature of their experiences or from men a defence of acknowledgement of the forces that led them to commit such unspeakable crimes. For example, there were no tribunals where the guilty were tried: nor were there any court cases in which a theatrical space

by the Project Dastaan founded by Sparsh Ahuja, co-founded by Sam Dalrymple and Saadia Gardezi. It engages with the partition survivors in India and Pakistan and includes volunteers, many of them descendants of the refugee families, who visually connect the survivors with the places of origin using the latest technology of virtual reality.[7] Yet another contribution of the next generations to revisiting and retellings of the painful past of their ancestors in the Indian subcontinent is exemplified by research of Aanchal Malhotra who explores memories of the partition through a study of material objects and oral testimonies. In 2017, a year that commemorated the seventieth year of India's and Pakistan's independence, Malhotra published a book, *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition Through Material Memory* (2017), where photographs of the objects carried by the survivors from their abandoned homes were accompanied by stories surrounding those objects and were further supplemented by authorial commentaries.[8]

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could have been created for the acknowledgment of the suffering imposed on women—a suffering in which the whole society was accomplice. Neither was it possible to hear of exemplary instances of altruism that could have offer redemptive possibilities."

[7] Cf. https://projectdastaan.org. Additionally, the Project Dastaan has also made a documentary movie, *Child of Empire* which is a "virtual reality interactive animated journey through the partition" (https://projectdastaan.org/about/) that features a Hindu boy and a Muslim boy as the main protagonists.

[8] Interestingly, its international edition of 2019 carried a different title i.e., *Remnants of Partition: 21 Objects from a Continent Divided*. The title refers more directly to the historical event in its first part and defines it further in the subtitle for the readership outside Indian subcontinent who might be unfamiliar with 'partition' in Indian context. The book was translated into Hindi and Punjabi respectively under yet different titles: *Yadõ ke bikhre motī. bā̃ṭvāre kī kahāniyā̃* or "Scattered pearls of memories. Stories of Partition" and *Bãtvare dī kahanī vastā̃ dī zubāñ* or "Stories of partition in the language of objects", both tittles perhaps correspond better to the title making patterns of these languages and reflect emotional shades of nostalgia as well. Malhotra's research begun with her project for MA thesis for which she interviewed partition refugees about objects carried by them to their newly founded countries with the aim to "tell stories of families, society, love, relationships, loss, displacement and yearning for a home that now exists on the other side of an unnatural divide" https://www.aanchalmalhotra.com/

The recent developments that reflect the continuing intragenerational and diasporic engagement with stories of the partition both in the personal, individual narratives as well as in the mainstream discourses of the past[9] demonstrate that the partition has had a long-lasting effect not only on those who had experienced it first-hand but also the next generations, effectively impacting the regional and international politics of the subcontinent. Geetanjali Shree, a critically acclaimed Hindi author and the Man Booker Prize winner for the English translation of her Hindi novel, *Ret samādhi* (2018), which evokes—among miscellany of other themes—the story of 1947, reflects, (…) "the partition has played a major role. And some people say it's over and finished, why talk about it, but it is not over, because it has continued to scar, and rapture, and impact mental attitudes" (Geetanjali Shree in an interview with Browarczyk, forthcoming). It is to Geetanjali Shree's novel that I turn now.

Partition: Intertextual retelling

The life trajectory of Ammā̃, the main female protagonist of Shree's novel, *Ret samādhi*, is moulded by the partition. The opening passage of the novel's third part, titled *Had-sarhad* (or "Boundaries and borders", Shree 2019: 265–274), narrates the turning point in Ammā̃'s mission to challenge the social (and institutional) restrains imposed on her as an elderly widowed Hindu mother (and grandmother), by daringly

work/remnants-of-a-separation/. Initially, the exhibition was launched in Montréal (2015) and later presented in other places. In 2022 Malhotra published two more books that pertain to the partition: another non-fiction, *In the Language of Remembering: The Inheritance of Partition,* and a novel, *The Book of Everlasting Things.* Along with Navdha Malhotra she has also created a virtual Museum of Material Objects (https://museumofmaterialmemory.com) in 2017.

[9] To mark the seventieth anniversary of India's independence a public institution, the Partition Museum, was established in Amritsar with its Delhi branch opened in 2023 (https://www.partitionmuseum.org). It exhibits official, as well as personal documents, objects provided by the survivors and refugees, and audio recordings of their oral histories, as well as some artwork.

crossing the frontier drawn in 1947. Accompanied by her daughter, she arrives at the India-Pakistan border to make her way across all "boundaries and borders" and reach the place she once called home. This wilful act offers Shree, in her novel, an opportunity to confront the post-memory of the partition in an original intertextual manner. Indeed, Ravinder Kumar (2024: 143) affirms the novelty of Shree's approach and states, "In a clear departure from modern political and postmodern apolitical approach towards partition literature, this novel takes a metamodern way to revisit trauma and displacement by reversing the roles of irony and metafiction to achieve coherence (…)." The opening passage of part three offers thus an excellent example of writing about the partition and its lasting aftermath in an intertextual and satirical manner, while simultaneously foregrounding and contextualizing that event within the contemporary debates on concepts such as nation, identity, national language, and others. It is in this scene that readers are given a vividly sarcastic and surreal description of the Wagah border ceremony,[10] which is attended not only by the regular crowds of Indians (and Pakistanis on the other side of the border) but also by a cohort of Hindi-, Urdu- and English-language writers who have authored texts pivotal to the partition literature genre, and even some characters from their canonical writings. The scene, taking place at the intersection of literary realism and nightmarish oneirism, is perhaps the pinnacle of Shree's innovative and experimental style

[10] Since 1986 the beating retreat ceremony takes place every day in the evening at the border crossing between India and Pakistan. The Pakistani Rangers and the Indian Border Security Force lower their respective flags and display martial vigor and skill in theatrically exaggerated marching and gestures. The ceremony is highly attended by Indian and Pakistani public sitting in the specially constructed stands on both side of the border, listening to patriotic songs and shouting patriotic slogans (cf. Sadana 2023). I attended the ceremony twice on the Indian side in the 2010s; it appeared that the movements of both parties are highly choreographed and well synchronized; there is also a master of ceremony in civil clothes who encourages the public to express their patriotism by shouting slogans in favour of India, like *Hindsutān zindabād* (or 'Long live India'), *jay hind* ('Victory to India'), *bhārat mātā kī jay* ('Victory to Mother India') and against Pakistan—*pakistān murdabād* ('death to Pakistan').

and her intertextual sensitivity. More so as the said writers and their canonical works appear time and again in the novel, as the text enters into a dialogue with them thus hinting at further narrative developments that will be discussed later.

Partition literatures of Hindi, Urdu, and English are represented in South Asia (and in Geetanjali Shree's text) by a plethora of established writers, among them: Bhisham Sahni (1915–2003), Krishna Sobti (1925–2019), Krishna Baldev Vaid (1927–2020), Mohan Rakesh (1925–1972),[11] Rahi Masoom Raza (1927–1992), Shaani (1933–1995), Manzoor Ehtesham (1948–2021), all of them household names of the Hindi literary scene; Saadat Hasan Manto (1911–1955), Rajinder Singh Bedi (1915–1984), Intizar Hussain (1923–2016), Joginder Paul (1925–2016)—the well-known exponents of Urdu writings; Balwant Singh (1920–1986) and Ramanand Sagar (1917–2005) writing in both Hindi and Urdu; and Khushwant Singh (1915–2014)—the English-language writer. In the passage in focus, the above-mentioned writers are seated in the auditorium at the Wagah border ceremony, somewhat lost in the contemporary moment of the supposed celebration—of India's (and Pakistan's) independent existence— which is accompanied by a nationalistic frenzy (Shree 2018: 267). The authors singled out by Shree come from all three religious communities—the Hindu, the Sikh and the Muslim—which found themselves embroiled in the conflict attending the movement/s for independent India and Pakistan. Many of them were forced by the circumstances to migrate to the newly formed nation-states on account of their religious affiliation (like Rakesh, Vaid, Sobti, Bedi, Hussain, Manto, Singh); yet others,

[11] Cf.: Rakesh (Singh and Wajahat 1973): "When we started writing the problem of partition was not a major problem facing the country; therefore, the certain impressions that one had of partition and the emotional disturbance one carried—as I personally did—have been covered by the slow dust of the emerging reality of this country. You were more concerned with what was happening around you than with partition, for what was happening around you seemed more devastating than partition itself. My contention is that partition killed perhaps a few hundred thousand, while the post-partition developments in this country have killed millions."

though Muslim, chose to remain in India (Raza, Ehtesham, Shaani); most had their roots in the undivided Punjab (like Vaid, Sobti, Bedi, Balwant Singh, Khushwant Singh, Sagar, Paul). Their decisions were dictated by the conundrums of political ideologies and personal circumstances, and their choices of literary idiom of expression often purposefully denied oversimplified conflation of Urdu with the Muslims and Hindi with the Hindus. All of them have authored texts that depict both the peaceful coexistence and the acrimony between various religious communities of the British India, especially just prior to 1947 (Vaid, Raza, Husain[12]), horrors of the partition (Sahni, Rakesh, Singh, Manto, Sagar, Bedi[13]) or both (Sobti[14]), else the life of the Muslims in the post-1947 independent India (Shaani, Ehtesham, Raza[15]). As for the characters from their writings, whom Shree transports into the chaotic scene at the Wagah border, the following make special appearance: Bishan Singh from Manto's canonical short story "Toba tek sĩh" ("Toba Tek Singh"); Abdullah Ganni, the protagonist of Mohan Rakesh's short story "Malbe kā mālik" ("Owner of the Rubble"); and Jarnail from Bhisham Sahni's novel *Tamas* (Shree 2018: 270).[16]

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[12] To give just some examples: Krishna Baldev Vaid's *Uskā bacpan* (1957) and *Guzrā huā zamānā* (1981); Raza's *Adhā gā̃v* (1966/1984); Husain's *Bastī* (1980).

[13] For instance, Khushwant Singh's novel, *Train to Pakistan* (1956); Hindi short story, "Amritsar ā gayā hai", and novel *Tamas* (1974), and short story *Pālī* by Bhisham Sahni; Rajinder Singh Bedi's Urdu short story "Lajvantī" (1966); Sagar's *Aur insān mar gayā* (1948); a novel *Khabrau* (1991) by Joginder Paul. Manto's short stories are often perceived as the epitome of the partition genre not only in Urdu literature for they are available in translation into other Indian languages, including Hindi, Punjabi and English. His well-known stories on partition include "Thaṇḍā gośt," "Ṭeṭvāl kā kuttā," "Toba tek sĩh," "Khol do" of 1950s. and many more. Cf. collections of texts on the partition translated into English from Hindi, Urdu, Bengali in Bhalla (1994) and Stewart and Paul Kumar (2007).

[14] Krishna Sobti: two Hindi novels *Zinndagīnamā* of 1979 and *Gujrāt pakistān se gujarāt hindustān* of 2017. Short stories: "Maĩ terī rakṣā karū̃gā," "Sikkā badal gayā", "Shammo kī azādī." Cf. Skakuj-Puri 2018, Vuille 2022.

[15] For instance, novels *Kālā jāl* (1965) and *Ek laṛkī kī ḍāyrī* by Shaani; novels *Sūkhā bargad* (1986) and *Dāstān-e-lāpatā* (1995) by Manzoor Ehtesham.

[16] In Manto's "Toba tek sĩh" (1955), following a joint decision of the independent India and Pakistan to relocate inmates of a psychiatric hospital to their newly

To those versed in Hindi literature the plight of those characters, combined with the broader knowledge of partition writings or details of the personal lives of the writers, evoke a wide range of intertextual references grounded in the narratives of the times.[17] The post-memory effect is thus induced, for the readers, through a well-crafted multi-layered metanarrative making use of both the texts of culture and their authors' biographies. The writers, the literary protagonists, and the writings themselves mingle with other actors on the scene: the border security force, the performers, and the audience attending the ceremony. The story of the partition is retold through the metanarrative of incongruity where fictional experiences of the literary characters and writers' real lives speak to the violence of the times and disturb the celebratory mood of the ceremony which, to start with, might be viewed as a programmed statement of nationalism that appears to encourage animosity between different communities in India and between the two countries.

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founded countries in accordance with their religious affiliation, one of the patients, who refuses to go to India, when he learns that his village is in Pakistan, declines to move beyond the no-man's land between the borders. Ganni, the protagonist of Rakesh's story, a Muslim who left Amritsar before the riots, revisits his ruined house seven years after the partition, 'rubble' from the title hints at that and all the mayhem caused by the partition. Unaware and uninformed by his ex-neighbors who had silently witnessed the killing of his family members, he exchanges pleasantries with a local thug who led the attacking mob and was responsible for brutal murder of his son and the merciless gangrape and killing of his daughter-in-law and two granddaughters. Jarnail, the eccentric freedom fighter and a the Indian National Congress activist from *Tamas*, preaches peace among Hindus and Muslims during the riots when one of the rioters breaks his skull with a lathi. Shree mentions attributes of those characters recognizable from the texts, i.e., rubble and skull respectively, and foregrounds Bhisham Singh's insanity, perhaps stimulated by the madness of the partition violence, in several passages of this scene, including quoting gibberish sentences written by Manto, when his character attempts to find from others on which side of the border his village Toba Tek Singh is.

[17] Shree mentions in this passage titles of *Zindaginamā* and *Gujrat pakistān se gujrāt hindustān* by Sobti and refers to titles of Vaid's *Guzrā huā zamānā* of 1981 and Hussain's *Bastī* (Shree 2018: 268, 271).

Partition: Literatures of India and gendered violence

The genre defined as the partition literature in South Asian context emerged most strongly in Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali and Sindhi literatures as the speakers of these linguistic regions were most severely affected by the fallout of the newly drawn borders and violence that accompanied the partition; and in English which is the pan-Indian literary medium. Apart from texts or authors mentioned in *Ret samādhi*, there are numerous other writers and numerous other works that epitomize the canon of the partition literature genre. For example, one of the earliest works in this genre is a collection of poems and stories by Agyeya (1911–1987) titled *Śarṇārthī* (or "Refugee") published in 1948; the two volume novel by Yashpal (1903–1976), *Jhuṭhā sac* (or "False truth") of 1958 and 1960; or *Kitne pakistān* (or "How many Pakistans") of 2000 by Kamleshwar (1932–2007).[18] No discussion on the partition writings in Urdu may be complete without the mention of the epic take on the history of the Indian subcontinent (from the 4th c. BCE till after the partition), i.e. the novel *Āg kā daryā* (1959), written by Qurratulain Hyder (1927–2007) and translated by her into English as *River of Fire*. Of special interest is Khadija Mastur's (1927–1982) posthumously published novel, *Zamīn* (1983), translated in 2019 into English as *A Promised Land*, which tells the story of Muslim refugees in Lahore and focuses on women's perspective. Likewise, a Punjabi novel *Pinjar* (1950), by Amrita Pritam (1919–2005), brings into the fore the figure of a kidnapped woman, trapped, to start with, in a patriarchal set-up. Among the best-known writings on the partition in Bengali are the two

[18] *Kitne pakistān* received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2003 and was translated into English as *Partitions* in 2006 by Ameena Kazi Ansari. Hasan (2015: 13): Kamleshwar's *Kitne Pakistan* "(…) in which Partition has moved on from being a specific historical fact to an overarching metaphor for sectarian violence anywhere. Partitions is both a discourse on history and a reflection on the role of the novelist in it. The unnamed writer, or adeeb, is the central figure, holding court throughout its pages, to which seemingly all the world's victims of injustice throng (…). This metafictional tableau completely undoes the form of the realist novel, which cannot, it suggests, encompass the madness of the twentieth century through its well-rounded tales, with their conventional beginnings and pat endings."

novels: *Epar ganga, opar ganga* of 1968 (*The Churning River. Partition Story*, 1995) by Jyotirmoyee Devi (1894–1988) and *Nilkontho pakhir khonje* (*In Search of a Blue-throated Bird*) of 1971 by Atin Bandyopadhyay (1934–2019).[19] A collection of Sindhi short stories edited and translated into English by Rita Kothari (2009) showcases the impact of the partition on Sindhis, both those who opted to stay in Pakistan and those who relocated to India. Narratives of the partition have been also written in English, like Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1960), Manohar Mangolkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) or Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1988, in 1992 published under title *Cracking India*) (cf. Roy 2010).

Partition violence, like all forms of aggression that emerge in times of war, conflict, and social unrest, is highly gendered. Though both men and women were exposed to the risks of expulsion, forced conversions, forced migrations, physical violence, murders and tortures, women and girls were additionally subjected to sexual violence and abductions, forced suicides, forced marriages, with the last followed later by the official recovery and repatriation initiated by the governments of the two nation-states (in accordance with the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act of 1949).[20] Because of the

[19] Pritam's novel refers to the plight of women abducted during partition and rejected by their families. Devi tells a story of a girl orphaned during riots, who gets abducted, recovered by the Indian state, but after being returned to her Hindu family is rejected by them. Bandyopadhyay describes communal tensions preceding partition and migration of Hindus from that erstwhile Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to West Bengal through a child's perspective. Cf. An anthology of Bengali short stories on the partition edited by Fraser (2006). A collection of articles edited by Bagchi and Dasgupta (2003) analyses the experience of Bengali women and their oral testimonies on the partition.

[20] Das (2006: 25) contextualises the recovery acts in terms of alliance between patriarchy and the state, "The problem of the abducted women moved from the order of the family to the order of the state by creating a new legal category of 'abducted person' (applicable only to women and children) who came within the regulatory power of the state. There was an alliance between patriarchy and the state as parens patriae, which made the official kinship norms of purity and honour much more rigid by transforming them into the law of the state."

prevailing notions of female purity and belief that man's honour and the honour of his family, caste, religious group or even nation is linked to female chastity, narratives of violence inflicted on women were disregarded, silenced, and sanitized in the official accounts of India's and Pakistan's painful birth.[21] Indeed, Roy (2010: 71–72) sums this aptly when she writes, "Inevitably then, women become the worst victims of atrocities during civil strife as victories against the enemy are inscribed, marked and celebrated on their bodies." Gendered violence is thus contextualised within culturally specific notions. Due to familial, communal, social, religious, and national censorship this kind of violence remained largely unacknowledged, and if retold, it was framed, as suggested by Pandey (1997: 2037) in his study of oral narratives of the partition violence based on interviews with survivors and perpetrators, within the two tropes of 'martyrdom' and 'revenge.' The two tropes visible in the recorded testimonies denote respectively *the violence forced upon the victims* and *the violence carried out in order to prevent further and greater violence*. Pandey claims that these tropes shrouded the gendered violence of the partition rhetorically and emotionally through the act of rebranding it.

It was largely the partition literature where this violence, including the gendered one, was acknowledged and vocalised from relatively early on because "while the formal historical narrative had failed to capture the human drama of partition, fictional writers had succeeded in representing the pain, trauma and loss suffered by ordinary people

[21] On silencing violence against women by mainstream historiographies see Arora (2020: 37): "Even though women writers like Amrita Pritam, Jyotirmoyee Devi, Anita Desai (*Clear Light of Day* 1980), Bapsi Sidhwa (*Cracking India* 1991), and others have written vocally about it, this gendered aspect of Partition was for long ignored by Partition historiographers until feminist critics and sociologists like Veena Das (*Critical Events* 1995), Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (*Borders and Boundaries* 1998), and Urvashi Butalia (*The Other Side of Silence* 1998) etc. drew attention to it. They began to problematise the figure of the abducted woman, notions of shame on the one hand and family and community honour on the other, intersections of community and state and their links to gender violence, so on and so forth." See Das (1995) Chapter Three "National Honour and Practical Kinship: Of Unwanted Women and Children."

affected by and displaced by the cataclysmic events that preceded and followed" [it] (Delacy 2021: 46). Yashpal's *Juṭhā sac*, Sahni's *Tamas*, or Sobti's *Gujrāt pakistān se gujrāt hindustān* constitute narratives that might be viewed as witness accounts, whereas Shree's *Ret samādhi* gives an intertextual and intragenerational re-reading of the partition violence.[22] The novels, appreciated by critics and readers alike, were published over a period of seventy years. While *Jhuṭhā sac* appeared in print in 1958 and 1960, a decade after the partition, *Tamas* came out in 1975, and *Gujrāt…* and *Ret samādhi* much later, in 2017 and 2018 respectively. Each of these texts was written in a different period of India's post-partition existence, at a different stage of their authors' lives and in different literary styles. The writers, but for Shree (born in 1957), are of a generation that came of age in the pre-independence India, with Yashpal having been born the earliest in 1903, Sahni in 1915, and Sobti in 1925. All are counted among the most accomplished Hindi writers, whose prose reflects the evolution of modern Hindi literature. Yashpal's realism (*yathārthvād*), suffused by his leftist leanings, often equates him with the literary legacy of Premchand.[23] Like Premchand and Sahni, he, too, is associated with the progressive (*pragatiśīl*) writers' movement. Sahni is usually pigeonholed as an exponent of, at first, the 'progressive', and then, the 'new short story' (*nāī kahānī*) even though he had distanced himself from the latter trend. Sobti's early short stories were likewise associated with the 'new short story' movement, but she is acclaimed for her unique literary style and fierce creative independence. According to Arora (2020: 212), she "is one of the prominent writers in Hindi whose writings have contested the male literary tradition. She has experimented with the expressions—linguistic and narrative—and introduced new styles and techniques of writing."

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[22] I am indebted to Maria Skakuj-Puri (2018) and her study of Sobti's writings, as well as to Richard Delacy's (2021) analysis of Sahni's *Tamas*. Their insightful research triggered my reflections on the narratives of violence against women in Hindi partition novels discussed in the present paper.

[23] Cf. Gajarawala (2012: 171): "Premchand and Yashpal who predicated their work on a narrative objectivity, a wide-angled lens shadowed by the political concerns and imperatives of contemporary history."

Shree, on the other hand, viewed as the postmodern voice of the contemporary Hindi prose, "shifts the focus to the women's voices in the context of transnational movements against terrorism, fundamentalism, and environmental degradation" (Arora 2020: 213).

Keeping all the above factors in mind, the questions I am going to ask are: how do the novels in focus narrate violence against women, i.e., how do they speak of the unspeakable? Is the violence against women foregrounded or does it need to be ferreted out from somewhere in between the lines, recovered from narrative gaps and silences? Do the literary texts in focus present perspectives of survivors? Of victims? Or of the perpetrators and onlookers? How do these narratives correspond to the aesthetics of the novels?

Studies on violence against women often draw on the concept of 'continuum of violence' introduced by Kelly in 1987 and reconceptualised for Indian context by Bradley (2017) who accentuated *the endemic nature of gender-based violence (GBV)*.[24] While Kelly centred on the personal and intimate experiences of aggression, researchers reworking her concept necessitated the introduction of social, cultural and religious contexts. Gender-based aggression is thus seen as a continuum of behaviours, starting from subtle restrictions to the extreme forms of physical and sexual violence, all used to control women in societies ruled by patriarchal norms. The 'endemic' character of various forms of violence often interprets this violence as a common male conduct, which is interiorized and viewed as normal by women, who in many cases tend to change their understanding of violence only gradually and in line with larger social changes (Das 2008). According to Aghtaie and Gangoli (2015: 14),

> to explore the expansion of the concept of a continuum of violence [it is important] to include structure and context, as we believe this can lead to a better understanding of how GBV is perceived, experienced, perpetrated

[24] Gender based violence is a broader term, cf. definition by Aghtaie and Gangoli (2015: 6): "We understand GBV as primarily violence against women (VAW), but also including violence against children and men, where such violence occurs as a result of their ascribed gender identity."

> and perpetuated in a variety of contexts. Within this, we use intersectionality to show that whilst researching GBV, gender identity has to be and is constant and paramount, because of the close relationship between GBV and patriarchal control, even as other identities—for example age, class—may mediate these experiences. In this way, we set ourselves apart from 'classic' understandings of intersectionality where no one identity is paramount.

Violence experienced by women during the partition had both structural and contextual aspects, it was intensified by the discriminatory traditions and laws, norms of propriety and purity (see Agthaie and Gangoli 2015: 8) and contextualised by the mayhem of communal, religious and national strife. Menon and Bhasin (1998: 40) in their study add a temporal dimension to their understanding of continuum of violence against women that "begun pre-Partition and continued into the early fifties."

Epic canvas, epic violence: *Jhuṭhā sac*

Yashpal's novel, *Jhuṭhā sac* (1958 and 1960), a canonical work of Hindi literature, is valued by both critics and readers.[25] After publication of its English translation in 2010, the reviews heralded it as a 'feminist epic' (Mustafa 2011) on account of Yashpal's sensitivity in depicting issues that concern women.[26] For example, Mahajan (2015) wrote,

[25] Dalmia (2017) defines it as "a powerful epic novel." A popular book reviewing platform, Goodreads (https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/34330909-jhootha-sach), rates it at 4.59 for seventy-nine ratings with 61% positive reviews (i.e., of maximum 5 stars), some comments read: "This novel is best realistic novel ever written in Hindi; One of the best books I've ever read; This is a gem; Amazing novel; It is classic. It is a good read book for all; opus magnum of Partition literature."

[26] The novel (Yashpal 2010) was translated by Yashpal's son, Anand, and published in the series Modern Classics by Penguin Books India under the title *This is Not That Dawn. Jhootha Sach*. The title invokes the English translation of a line from a famous Urdu poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, "Subah-e-āzādī"/"Dawn

"Yashpal's goal, in his epic novel, was to dispel the macho jubilation of independence by talking directly about the experiences of women," and Yadav (2025: 129) underlined,

> The most compelling aspect of the novel is its feminist discourse. The current research on Partition and communal strife has underlined with great force that it is women who are most susceptible to violence in riots. That Yashpal could highlight this fact with documentary precision six decades ago, indicates his commitment towards women's liberation and his social insight. *Jhootha sach* presents with artistic skill the trauma inflicted on men and women. (…) In the tragedy of Partition the homecoming of the lost men was an affair of love and celebration whereas the homecoming of women was not only a moment of mourning, they were also humiliated and forced to come back from the threshold.

Interestingly, Yadav commented on the exclusion of the vernacular *Jhūṭhā sac* from the debates on the partition literature, by pointing out its inaccessibility to the non-Hindi reader prior to the novel's English translation, and hence described it as "a subaltern text on the hitherto untouched Dalit, Muslim and feminist perspectives from the margins" (Yadav 2025: 133).

The novel begins around the mid-1940s, in Lahore, where Yashpal himself had attended middle school and college. Though initially a follower of Gandhi, he grew disillusioned with Gandhi's political vision and was attracted to the more radical activities of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. Imprisoned in 1932 for his involvement in a bomb attack on the British viceroy (1929), he served 6 years in jail and on release was banned from visiting Lahore. Despite that he visited the city undercover in the mid 1940s and then again briefly in 1955 (Trivedi 2010: XVI). Mahajan (2015) points out that in *Jhuṭhā sac*, Yashpal "recreated the city he'd lost—its rituals, its superstitions, its political movements, its people." The novel was published in two volumes, each a few years apart, with the first, subtitled *Vatan aur*

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of Independence," which is a bitter commentary reflecting disappointment with independence that was so eagerly awaited but brought violence and strife.

deś ("The Homeland and the Country") telling the story of the events before and soon after the partition, and the second, *Deś kā bhaviṣya* ("The Future of the Country"), covering the years of the early independence till the mid 1950s.[27]

The narrative opulence of the novel rests on the fact that it weaves a vast canvas peopled by numerous characters and moving between various places but in detail chronicles the lives of the three main protagonists, Tārā and Jaydev Pūrī, who are siblings, and Kanak, who is the love interest of Jaydev. The myriads of novel's characters come from various religious communities and social strata, but Yashpal is not biased towards any group depicted in the novel; rather, he attempts a dissection of human nature regardless of religion and is careful to evenly distribute the good and the bad across characters featured in the novel. Yashpal, "the most realist of post-Premchand Hindi novelists" (Govind 2014: 164), was not only personally involved in the struggle for independence but also did a thorough fact-checking research before writing the book (Mustafa 2011, Dalmia 2017) hence the careful alignment of characters' predicaments with the historical developments taking place in Lahore.

Instances of violence against women set in motion the narrative of the first volume of *Jhuṭhā sac* which centres on the turmoil preceding and following India's partition as an event that uprooted and destroyed lives of those forced to migrate from one part of the divided Punjab or Bengal to another. The foregrounding of violence against women as depicted by Yashpal draws on the life of Tārā and provides numerous and varied instances of its manifestation which thus creates a continuum starting from restrictions regarding her behaviour and access to education and ending on physical and sexual violence. All these

[27] Though it is not possible to examine here contemporary discussions surrounding the notions of *vatan* (homeland, native realm, the last in the Miłosz understanding of the term) and *deś* (country, nation-state) and their changing connotations, I would merely like to point out that many of the pre-independence and early post-independence Hindi writers wrote on the subject, e.g. Premchand, Nirmal Verma, Krishna Sobti, to name a few. The titles of Yashpal's two volumes of *Jhuṭhā sac* reference these discussions.

attestations of violence are crucial to the development of the storyline. The novel interweaves decisive events from the lives of Jaydev, Tārā and Kanak, but the present inquiry spotlights Tārā's story as it is there that the narratives of violence against women come to the fore. In the following paragraphs I will closely analyse some relevant passages.

Tārā, a 19-year-old from a conservative lower-middle-class Hindu family, faces opposition from her mother, family, and society regarding her desire to pursue education. Her upbringing contrasts with the freedom enjoyed by Kanak who is of an affluent, upper-class background. Tārā is pressured into marrying Somrāj, an uneducated bully of her own caste, even though she loves Asad, a Muslim student and a fellow pro-independence movement activist. She delays her marriage in order to finish her studies and hopes to elope with Asad, but he turns down her plan due to his Communist Party's opposition to interreligious marriages during turbulent times such as these. Tārā admires her brother, Jaydev, a freedom fighter and an intellectual who secretly loves Kanak, a woman of a different social class. However, despite his unorthodox romantic engagement, he refuses to back Tārā in her desire to continue her involvement with Asad; he might be a reformer outside of home but not within (cf. Yadav 2025: 129). Tārā struggles to balance her life against the oppressive social and religious expectations of her family and the conservative Hindu society, with her life trajectory governed by the coercive measures of structural violence.

On her wedding night, sometime at the end of July 1947, Tārā notices three calendars hanging in the bedroom: the first shows a uniformed Subhas Chandra Bose, the second Sītā gesturing towards the golden deer, and the third a soap advertisement featuring a young woman (Yashpal 2005: 169). The three images reference, thoughtfully and precisely, the current historical moment: popular attachment to the epic *Ramāyāṇa* with its ingrained theme of female suffering and forbearance, the objectification of women in advertisements that overtly aim at shaping a new modern female, and the male leadership with their specific visions of the future nation-state. Bose's image in the uniform of the commander-in-chief of the Indian National Army echoes Yashpal's violent approach to struggle for the independence,

aligning with his own past and with the turbulent 1940s; the image of Sita foreshadows her own abduction (and Tārā's), and the soap advertisement projects women like Tārā as mere objects to be cherished, but also owned and disowned at will. Yashpal's referencing of *Rāmāyaṇa* serves as a clue to the subsequent unfolding of the narrative with its abduction of Tārā and other women. It also provides author with a cultural topos to inscribe women's misery. However, as his narrative positioning obviously gives him a hindsight, it allows him to include in the novel the post-independence elements of public debate on the abducted women, whose plight is compared to Sītā's during the campaign for their rehabilitation. There are more refences to that in the latter part of the novel.

On the very first night of their marriage Tārā is physically assaulted by her newlywed husband, Somrāj, when she responds with anger to his allegations of her supposedly not wanting to marry him and of being promiscuous. His accusations originate in the fact that Somrāj saw Tārā participating in demonstrations against the British, side by side with male students; this supposed transgression of norms of social propriety regarding her social interactions with her male colleagues enrages him (ibid.: 171). As Hindu-Muslim riots are already taking place in Lahore, both in the time period before and during the wedding, Somrāj leaves the room when interrupted by angry shouts and gunshots, and Tārā—unable to follow him because of the outbreak of fire—escapes through the roof. The wedding night deplorably marks the first attempt at sexual assault Tārā has to face, and notably the assailant is not only a person of her own community but her newly wedded husband. The attack takes place at the very moment when she attempts to come to terms with her marriage. Domestic violence, both beating and an attempt of rape, are coercive measures that a husband might resort to in order to install in his wife the behaviour he considers proper. Besides, there seems to be a narrative symmetry between the tale of violence directed at members of a community different than one's own during the riots (which also builds the overall atmosphere of danger unfolding in the background of the wedding night) on one hand and the narration of the abusive behaviour of the husband on the other.

The Lahore riots—which are a historical fact—intertwine with the fictious developments in the life of the protagonists, with violence acting as the link between the two. It is noteworthy that Tārā is not a silent victim; she puts up a fight. But later, lying battered on the floor, she contemplates suicide, which seems like a liberating act originating in her own agency, an escape from the cruelty of a forced marriage, and verbal and physical aggression. Rapid and unexpected turns of events driving the story might reflect the circumstances of lives tossed about by the partition but for some readers of today they might bring to mind the old-fashioned style of romantic and sensational narratives.[28]

Despite the hazards of the city during the riots, Tārā choses to flee into the dangerous and the unknown rather than return to a husband who was forced on her by her family and who assailed her physically. During her flight she is abducted by a Muslim man, Nabbu. Undeterred by his wife's loud protests, he locks Tārā up and tells his wife, who keeps hurling abuses at both, that he is going to sell Tārā once he has taken sexual advantage of her. Tārā gets robbed of her bridal jewellery but is also beaten and sexually assaulted for the second time the same night.

The narration is conducted in a matter-of-fact manner, with the third person omniscient narrator describing the events slowly, in a bare, realistic style, focusing on their sequence; at times readers get to know Tārā's feelings and thoughts. Before raping her, Nabbu slaps, curses and threatens his protesting wife, drinks some water and smokes cigarettes. Readers, along with frightened Tārā, wait for what seems unavoidable; the narrative reveals the banality of evil: sexual attack happens in between the ordinary, everyday acts, and is for Nabbu in no way more consequential than any of his quotidian chores (ibid.: 173–174). Trivedi (2010: xxi) compares this moment to the "impersonal cold-bloodedness" known from Manto's writings. Nabbu is a notorious mugger, known in the neighbourhood for delinquency;

[28] One of critical reviewers on Goodreads (https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/34330909-jhootha-sach) comments, "Certainly more suited to the old reader than today. The book really reads like a soap drama due to its simplicity and vivid imagery."

unruly times provide him with an opportunity to act on his lowest instincts. When Nabbu hits and kicks her into surrender, Tārā asks him to kill her instead. She still tries to ward him off, but once her hands are tied and she is thrown onto the bed, she loses consciousness and awakes next morning to the unfamiliar neighbourhood's calls for *sahari* (pre-dawn meal during the month of fasting) and prayer as it is the holy month of Ramadan.[29]

Readers witness how the narrative distressingly takes another turn towards the ordinary, the quotidian, even if exemplified by a festive occasion, as if nothing had happened; a morning scene of regular festive preparations is juxtaposed with Tārā's abject position—she still lies on the floor, unconscious, lifeless, naked, tied up. The wife throws abuses at Nabbu and Tārā, who wakes up when the husband batters his wife. The wife, regularly abused by Nabbu, is angered by Tārā's presence, and is not concerned with her being violated. It is in her character that Yashpal yet again portrays women that internalise male violence in the light of its overall presence. The wife laments in the courtyard and calls other women from the neighbourhood to witness her ill-treatment, while Tārā lies inside the house and tries to kill herself by pounding her head on the wall.[30] Some women alarmed by the sounds gather around her and pull her away from the wall, untie her hands, give her water, and cover her up. When she is recognized as a Hindu, one woman shouts that she deserves to be raped, only to be rebuked by an elder woman who says that while men are divided because of religion, women suffer alike. Others agree, noting that men's conflicts always bring suffering to women (ibid.: 174); such a kind of statements are reiterated in the novel several times. Yashpal conveys

[29] The festival of Eid ul Fitr, marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan and fasting, was celebrated in 1947 on the 18th of August, just few days after the independence. The rioting, in which Tārā's marital home was burnt and she herself abducted, has taken place during Ramadan.

[30] In the second volume of the novel, there is a parallel, excruciating scene of a successful suicide of an abducted woman, Bantī, who is rejected by her own family after finding them in their new home in Delhi (Yashpal 2005: 255–256); she kills herself virtually on the threshold of the family's new house.

didactic messages directly and repeatedly, either through the words of the protagonists or by way of Tārā's thoughts. When Nabbu's crime is exposed, he justifies it as a revenge against the Hindus, but the elders condemn him. In spite of this noticeable didactic flair, Yashpal succeeds in displaying diverse speech patterns and cadences of characters belonging to various religious and caste communities found in the novel and thus ushers a polyphonous range of conflicting opinions and ideas voiced by individuals of various communities portrayed in his epic canvas of the times.

Protesting neighbours force Nabbu to hand Tārā over to Ināyat Alī, a respected local Muslim leader known as Hāfiz, a title given to those who know the Quran by heart. Fearing police bias powered by communal tension, Muslims choose not to involve the authorities. While staying with the orthodox Muslim family, Tārā is pressured to convert and marry their son. Hāfiz treats her kindly, hoping for religious merit through her conversion, while his wife is indifferent and the daughter-in-law increasingly hostile when she realizes that Tārā is resisting conversion. After proclamation of Pakistan's independence and the passing of the new law requiring all Hindu women to be reported, the son promises to ask the police to send Tārā to a Hindu refugee camp in Lahore.

Instead of reaching a haven, Tārā is abducted for the second time by men pretending to be policemen (ibid.: 199). Once she realises that she has been tricked she fights and tries to escape. Beaten into submission for the third time, she finds herself dumped in the courtyard of a ruined house with five other women, two of them fully clothed, one wearing only the lower garment, another only the upper one, and the last one completely naked. They seem to be fighting. It takes Tārā a while to understand that they are fighting over her clothes. One of the half-dressed women, Bantī, tries to protect her; with time they will grow close.

Tārā is now imprisoned in a deserted house with other abducted women. She is in the state of complete stupor, and it is Bantī, who convinces her not to give up. She also shares with her (and the others) the story of her own kidnapping; that telling is interjected by stories

narrated by the other abducted women. Their testimonies cover a wide range of instances of violence but also indirectly testify to the state of mind of the two women who are incapable of sharing what horrifying atrocities they themselves had suffered. This changes Tārā's attitude. Confronted with their suffering, she learns to endure her own. The stories of some of the women are told in extenso, of some only in bits and pieces, and of some others are shrouded in silence throughout the time of the captivity.

Along with Tārā, the readers learn from Bantī about the attack on the thirty-six Hindus of Bantī's village by a mob of five hundred Muslims (ibid.: 199). Yashpal, true to his leftist beliefs, does not fail to offer readers a socio-cultural background regarding the resentment between the communities when he makes Bantī talk about her village with its Hindu landowners and moneylenders, and its Muslim labourers. Surrounded by an attacking Muslim mob, Hindus plead to spare them. At that moment one of the other women, Satwant, begins crying and interrupts Bantī to tell how the people of her village, all Sikhs, managed to have themselves escorted safely to the railway station but after they were asked by the policemen to hand in the guns, were mercilessly attacked. Bantī continues her story unalarmed by Satwant's crying; she recalls how their Muslim attackers were joined by their Muslim neighbours, who initially agreed to let Hindus go but then turned on them. Bantī held on to her young sister-in-law who was being dragged by an assailant, while her mother-in-law took her son from her lap (ibid.: 200). Satwant now interrupts again and recalls how she hid in a train with her son but was found and saw her child being battered to death against the floor.

Yashpal provides the two women with a realistically drawn narrative space so that they may present their testimonies. The women interrupt each other whenever experiences of one trigger similar memories in the other. The dialogue demonstrates yet again Yashpal's mastery in capturing nuances of colloquial exchanges, with their specific rhythms and cadences. The narrative strategy of evoking crisp and evocative tales of survivors' experiences encapsulates the unspeakable terror of sexual violence by merely listing the sequence of events leading to

and surrounding the traumatic incident, but—importantly—from the survivors' vantage point.

Bantī returns to her tale: the Hindus of her village—threatened by the mob—walk away but leave behind (possibly to appease or slow down the mob) Bantī and three other girls; one of them jumps into a well, the others are abducted. Bantī pleads with the aggressors to let the young girls go free but instead is abused and attacked; she recognises one of the attackers as the worker who used to do laundry at her house. Yashpal once more brings ideological perspective and adds a social commentary on the socio-economic origins of communal animosity. Bantī, like Tārā, fights her assailants, but overpowered by them, tied, and beaten, faints. Incapable of continuing her story she bursts into tears; at that moment Satwant curses all men for raping women, and confesses: "Only for last five days, since coming here, can I say that my body has not been abused" (Yashpal 2010: 451; *jab se pā̃c din āī hai tab se miṭṭī khvār nahī̃ huī*, Yashpal 2005: 193). It is again Bantī's turn, she recalls how she woke up tied up and naked next to the well; she was thirsty but women—all of whom she knew as her neighbours—who have come to fetch water, ignored her pleas; she could not understand how they could be so unfeeling. After a while, mother of one of the mob leaders threw a *kamīz* to cover her and gave her some water but asked her not to tell anyone. In the evening, she noticed the dead body of one of the captured girls and tried to jump into the well to escape her abductor but was forced onto a cart and brought to a secluded house. Saying, "My insides are hurt so badly I can't tell you. I'm hardly able to walk straight." (Yashpal 2010: 451; *aisī coṭẽ ā gaī haĩ ki abhī tak pā̃v sīdhe nahī̃ paṛte*, Yashpal 2005: 194), she ends her story and breaks into sobs.

Then Durgā, who is wearing only the lower garment, joins in. She recalls how the Muslims neighbours in her village helped Hindus to escape to a nearby station. But while on the train, they got attacked and she was pulled out from the carriage—she laments the baby she lost. She was gangraped repeatedly: "I lost count of it after ten or fifteen times. May God infest my attackers' bodies with worms (…) I was dying of hunger, and my breasts were aching with milk and they kept

abusing my body…" (Yashpal 2010: 452; *koī gintī thī das-pandrah kī! parmeśvar inke badanõ mẽ kīṛe ḍālẽ (...) peṭ mẽ bhūkh aur chātiyẽ dūdh se phaṭī jā rahī thĩ; ūpar se jism ko ciṛe-phāṛe ḍāl rahe the*, Yashpal: 2005: 195). The women then tell the story of Amaro, who is lying inside the house with high fever. Satwant explains that Amaro keeps silent, and her tale remains untold, but because Satwant is from the same village, she knows that Amaro has witnessed her five-months-old baby being killed in front of her. Then Tārā learns from Bantī about the last of the captured girls, Lakkhī, who also does not talk to others and was brought in naked; she was the one who fought with Durgā over Tārā's *kamīz*. The other women tell her that Lakkhī seems mad, she keeps indoors and repeats two sentences, nothing is known of her plight. This narrative strategy of giving voice to some of the female characters, survivors of violence, and addressing the depth of suffering caused by such forms of aggression by silencing the other two female survivors is a persuasive device for attesting to the accounts of vicious transgressions. It allows for a probe into both the unspeakableness of those experiences and the silences imposed by physical and mental torment caused by the trauma. Further, it gives an insight into the why some of the stories were not told at all or why they could have been told only by a third person. Dalmia (2017) praises this final part of the first volume of Yashpal's novel in these words,

> The last episode of volume one is treated in graphic detail, without commentary, without mitigation of any kind, just dry fact piled upon dry fact, interspersed with Tārā's thoughts. The very act of speaking the unspeakable, of finding words for the inexplicable, makes for a hardly bearable intensity of experience, both for those exposed to the violence as well as for the reader. This is Yashpal at his best and in these last pages of the first volume of his epic is encapsulated the plight of thousands of women, young and old, Hindu and Muslim, at this juncture of the subcontinent's history.

While I do agree with Dalmia's appreciation of Yashpal's prose, I disagree with her interpretation of final passages. The style remains

realistic, with survivor accounts presented without narrator's commentary. However, unlike earlier sections where Tārā's painful experiences were narrated, Yashpal's decision to give voice to women who endured atrocities and to depict protagonists whose suffering is evident in their physical and mental state highlights his literary creativity and gender sensitivity. In case of Tārā, there is no one she can turn to with her tale of suffering; her voicelessness when she is violated reflects her helplessness; the aggressor would not listen to her anyhow, that is why the narrator unveils her inner thoughts, including that of suicide. As for the other captive women, the gathering creates a realistic opening for them, and for the author, to voice their chronicles of oppression in a credible narrative context. The closing passages of volume one examine the horrors of sexual violence as narrated by the victims themselves. Their accounts are direct yet deeply emotional, drawing readers into their experiences as if they were present next to Tārā, listening first-hand.

The characters featured in the novel come from diverse religious and class backgrounds, with distinct speech patterns—Bantī uses rhetorical questions, while Satwant and Durgā resort to abusive language when speaking of their attackers. In recounting violence, survivors convey its physical toll—"my insides hurt, I cannot walk"—as well as mental gaps—"I fainted, I lost count." Two testimonies remain untold, as the survivors are too traumatized to speak. Yashpal's attention to details, such as abducted women being half-dressed or naked, depicts the aftermath of violence without resorting to verbal utterances of the victims themselves. Some, like Durgā, overwhelmed by their own pain, grow irritated hearing of others' suffering. Yashpal records a vast range of gendered aggression, with perpetrators including policemen, soldiers, men of other communities, and even the supposed guardians.

With passing days Tārā learns further details about the abducted women whose stories continue to unfold: a sentence, or half a sentence at a time. The tales are as fragmented as the women's lives which—at that moment—are difficult to patch. The house is frequented by an elder woman and one of the abductors, who bring women scraps of food. The woman, a madam, is portrayed as yet another perpetrator

of violence, who attempts to lure captive girls into sex work. She manipulates them by not bringing them enough food, putting all blame on their man-abductor and promising that she will take care of them once they come with her. Scarcity of food ignites unscrupulous quarrels and fights among the abducted women.

Meanwhile, Bantī and Satwant find some solace in prayers, but Tārā, in tune with her rebellious spirit, tries to convince women to escape—the house is not guarded—but is persuaded by their arguments of dangers awaiting them in the outside world which can only bring more suffering of the kind they have already experienced. Durgā asks rhetorically, "Who would want to go out and be torn to pieces?" (Yashpal 2010: 460; *bāhar jākar apne cithṛe uṛvāne haĩ?* Yashpal 2005: 203), implying the threat of physical and sexual violence. Tārā proposes that they escape and commit suicide in a well nearby, but Bantī explains that it is not easy, and she recalls her own unsuccessful attempt.

The abducted women voice their opinions regarding possible social retribution for having been abducted. Durgā talks about the impossibility of being accepted by their families and communities, "A woman once separated from her family and a fruit plucked from the tree cannot be put back as before" (Yashpal 2010: 461; *ghar se niklī tīmī aur aur ḍāl se ṭūṭā phal, unnkā phir mel kyā?*, Yashpal 2005: 204). This enrages Bantī, who challenges the claim and says she is not to be blamed as men of her family proved incapable of protecting her. The notions of alleged impurity and the harsh consequences in case of breech are internalised by some women, but Bantī talks of Sītā as an example of an unblemished captive, accepted by her husband once her ordeal was over; thus, yet again the authoritative discourse of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* is recalled. In the initial part of the second volume of the novel, Bantī's desire to be reunited with her family will end tragically with her suicide after their outright rejection (Yashpal 2005: 103).

Meanwhile the kidnapper brings two more girls, one of whom is bleeding heavily after a miscarriage caused by rape. The younger girl, barely fifteen, recounts how they were abducted from a refugee caravan heading to India, revealing yet another brutal mechanism of the partition violence. On another visit, the abductor arrives with a father

and a son duo seeking to buy a wife for the younger man. Unbothered by women's captivity, they inspect them like pieces of merchandise with father insisting on finding a virgin. Durgā points to Tārā, who hides the fact of her marriage, but when Tārā defiantly threatens them in Hindi, the father disapproves of her boldness. Ultimately, the son chooses Durgā, who is forcibly taken away.

After several days, the house is raided by a group of people made up of several policemen, soldiers, two civilians, and a female social worker, Kausalyā Devī. The abducted women hide in fear, but Tārā gathers courage to step forward and learns from Kausalyā that she is in charge of Indian government mission to rescue abducted Hindu women.[31] In one of the men Tārā recognizes Asad, who then asks her to marry him, but she remains silent. The captives are taken to a refugee camp located in Tārā's former college. She also learns that her family believes her to be dead. Asad seeks her answer by the evening, but Kausalyā forces her to leave early, securing seats for the rescued women on the first transport to India. Appalled by Tārā's reluctance to leave, as she had not mentioned earlier that she has any relatives in Lahore, Kausalyā presumes an indecent reason and insists she departs. As Tārā crosses into India via Wagah border, she witnesses Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh caravans moving in opposite directions, passes burnt vehicles, scattered belongings, and corpses. The first volume ends with Tārā stepping off the bus into the independent India.

Narrative of Tārā's life is shaped by violence, with gendered oppression central to her tale and dominating much of the novel's first volume. This continuum of violence starts from her family's control over her behaviour, education, and marriage to the emotional, domestic, physical, and sexual abuse she endures on her wedding night and

[31] Kausalyā or Kauśalyā is a fairly popular North Indian female name, but it also references the epic, as it is the name of Rām's mother, an epitome of female propriety and faithfulness. Cf. Menon and Bhasin 1998: 123–124: "Recovering women, who had been abducted, moreover, forcibly converted, restoring them to their own and the larger Hindu family, and ensuring that a generation of new-born Hindu children was not lost to Islam through their repatriation to Pakistan with their mothers, was part of this concern."

after her abduction. Yashpal depicts various men—Somrāj, Nabbu, the abductor, and others—and women—the rapist's wife, the madam—as perpetrators. He carefully distributes good and evil across all communities, portraying Muslims both as the idealistic Asad and the brutal Nabbu, just as Somrāj and Jaydev represent different exemplars of Hindu men. In Yashpal's tale of the partition the forms of gendered violence are specifically foregrounded and focalised around experiences of a group of survivors—including Tārā—and victims. Tellingly, Yashpal gives voice to them in their individual tales of various scenarios of aggression known also from the actual testimonies of the survivors.

Yashpal also highlights how women internalize and propagate notions of chastity and purity, reinforcing gendered violence, "[t]he irony itself is that women themselves played a role in this game of patriarchy" (Yadav 2025: 130). However, the narrator's reflections, often presented through Tārā's thoughts, can feel repetitive. The recurring comparison of men to beasts and women as their suffering victims—voiced by women across religious communities, such as the Muslim women in Nabbu's neighbourhood and the Hindu women like Bantī—may echo contemporary public debates or be inspired by survivor testimonies. Else, reflect a lack of vocabulary at author's or women's disposal to speak of the unspeakable.

In the second volume of the novel, Tārā—despite her horrific experiences—will work for the betterment of the society in her newly found homeland, whereas her brother, Jaydev, will turn from a model idealist into an utterly corrupt and opportunistic individual. There is a strong didactic streak in Yashpal's narrative of Tārā's life and the happy ending. Undoubtedly, Yashpal's sympathy is with Tārā, who in her rebellious spirit and reservations about religion seems to serve as a female alter ego of the writer. Chandrahas Choudhry (2012) summarises the argument thus,

> it is Tara, the apparently helpless, brutalised victim, who slowly gathers strength and makes an independent life for herself in the Indian capital, Delhi, watching out not just for herself but for other women in trouble.

> The storyline reveals not just Yashpal's feminism – once she has a modicum of power and agency, Tara repeatedly resists any attempts to return her back to a normative world of female deference and duty – but also his emphasis on the individual's right to dissent from the collective.

Having said that, I will now turn to the narratives of violence against women in *Tamas*.

In defence of the secular India: *Tamas*

Tamas' multiple translations and the cinematographic adaptation into a 1988 TV series with a script co-authored by Bhisham Sahni and the director, Govind Nihlani, "underscore[s] its enduring significance in the domain of literary fiction in South Asia" (Delacy 2021: 49).[32] It is, perhaps, the only Hindi novel translated into English three times (by Jay Ratan in 1988, by Bhisham Sahni himself in 2001 and by Daisy Rockwell in 2016). In his study of *Tamas* Richard Delacy writes (2021: 42)

> I argue that *Tamas* invokes the violence of the partition as a trope to underscore what may be said to be the failure to follow through on the promise of independence 25 years earlier. The communal divisions that were exacerbated by the partition of the country in 1947 appeared to have in no way lessened in 1973. In many ways the production of a novel that revisits the violence and mayhem of the partition could be seen as an attempt to shake its readership from the inertia of the current moment and reinforce a secular humanism that could take India forward.

[32] There were several controversies around the airing of the miniseries (later remade into a four-hour film) on the national broadcaster, Doordarshan. There were protests and court cases against its screening, which subsequently was banned for years because of the alleged possibility of it being an instigation to religious clashes or riots; Nihlani received life-threats and was under police protection. Noteworthy, Nihlani, like Sahni, experienced the partition, see Bhaskar 2009, Nihlani 1988, Nowakowska 2015.

Sahni in his autobiography (Sahni 2010) and Nihlani (1988) in the introduction to the English translations of the novel, speak of their disenchantment with the state of affairs regarding the quarter-of--a-century-old Indian democracy and the rise of communal forces mentioned by Delacy, linking it specifically to two calamitous events: the anti-Muslim Bhiwandi riots of 1971 and the war of 1971 that led to the creation of Bangladesh (cf. Nowakowska 2015). Sahni, who was born in Rawalpindi, witnessed the 1926 riots there as a child and later the March 1947 riots as a Congress activist. In 1971 he visited Bhiwandi after the Bombay riots where pivotal role in igniting and perpetuating violence was played, on one hand, by the right-wing Hindu organizations and on the other, the Muslim associations.[33] Like in case of some other authors of non-fictional accounts of violence, Sahni's retelling of the partition is linked to the post-partition communal violence that triggered memories of earlier events. Interestingly, Butalia, Menon and Bhasin, Das, and others based in Delhi, begun to work on their accounts of the partition violence soon after the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 (cf. Skakuj-Puri 2018: 182).

To understand the narrative importance of violence in the anti--communal message of *Tamas,* let us take a look at one unusual book review, namely an excerpt from a verdict of Justice Bakhtawar Lentin and Justice Sujata Manohar of the Bombay High Court, quoted by Nihlani in his introduction to the novel (1988: II),

> *Tamas* is an anatomy of that tragical period. It depicts how communal violence was generated by fundamentalists and extremists in both communities, and how innocent persons were duped into serving the ulterior purposes of fundamentalists and communalists. (…) *Tamas* is in equal measures against the fundamentalists and extremists of both communities,

[33] Sahni in an interview with Bhalla (2006: 121) said, "I wrote the novel because when I went to Bhiwandi I suddenly remembered the Rawalpindi riots. I happened to see the riots there. Some of the things I saw at Bhiwandi were so similar to what I had experienced at Rawalpindi, that I started writing. And then one thing suggested another... I myself figure in my novel in scenes where I describe the activities of the Congress. I participated in prabhat pheries, etc."

> and not in favour of hatred towards any one particular community. Both communities are treated equally for blame as they are for praise. The message is loud and clear directed as it is against the sickness of communalism.

Sahni's tale of the pre-partition violence narrates a sequence of events which take place in a fictional town and its rural surroundings right before the outbreak, during, and after the Hindu-Muslim riot. His take on violence is twofold: on one hand he describes the havoc it caused in individual lives and on the other, exposes ruthless political manipulations that lead to the outbreak of the riot in the first place—screening communal organizations both Hindu and Muslims, political parties—Congress, Hindu Mahasabha, Muslim League, the communists—and the British colonial administration. Because "the real protagonist of the novel is not the person but the riot itself" (Rockwell 2016: x), the plot follows a group of characters whose plight it recounts at different stages of the riot's progression, right from the moment of political instigation to the outbreak, then the peak of violence, and finally—its petering out.

The instances of gendered aggression are not foregrounded as directly as in the case of *Jhuṭhā sac* where plot follows closely Tārā's life marked at every turn by violence; however, the sheer gruesomeness of some of the incidents narrated in *Tamas*—among other horrifying tales of murder, cruelty, loot and arson—make them conspicuous, even more so as some of them are narrated as though in passing, by the perpetrators themselves. The incidents of gendered aggression include: a supposed rumour about a Muslim girl being molested by people of a different religious group—this ignites hostility in the neighbourhood; a Hindu couple's concern about their unmarried daughter's safety at the onset of the communal tension; abduction of a Hindu widow by a Muslim and her parents' refusal to take her back; gangrape of a Hindu girl; mass suicide of a group of Sikh women and their children; repeated promises of an older Sikh husband to kill his wife before they are captured to spare her from pain and indignity (they manage to escape to safety). The episodes, scattered throughout the novel, mark different points on the scale of intensity of violence,

from molestation to sexual assault, to abduction, to rape, murder, and suicide. In my reading I will focus first on a brief account of rape and then on Sahni's narrative, multi-angled inquiry into a self-inflicted group death.

Perhaps the most shocking incident of the novel is narrated by a rapist, a Muslim man who boasts about his exploits to his companions and describes a Hindu girl, who was gangraped by several men, "'I swear by Allah the Pure. When my turn came, she didn't make a peep underneath me—she wasn't moving at all! I looked down and she was dead.' He laughed hollowly and added, 'I was doing a corpse'" (Sahni 2016: 285; *"kasam allāh pāk kī. jab merī bārī āyī to nīce se na hũ̃, na hã̃, vah hile hī nahī̃, maĩ ne dekhā to laṛkī marī huī."aur vah khikhlī-sī hāsī hãskar bolā, "maĩ laś se hī zanā kie jā rahā thā."* Sahni 2011: 258). The fact that this gruesome account is narrated in a few sentences framed as aggressor's bragging, which is prefaced by a religious invocation and interspaced by his laughter, is a potent narrative strategy that exposes inhuman and abominable act for what it is without a need for any additional authorial commentary. The episode echoes the seminal partition short story by Manto titled "Thaṇḍā gośt" ("Cold meat"), one of "the most famous fictional attempts to represent the sexually assaulted subject of Partition violence" (Kumar 2008: 136).[34]

[34] Kumar 2008: 137: "'Cold Meat' is the deathbed testimony of a rapist who is belatedly rendered impotent in a potent instance of the visceral transmission of trauma from victim to perpetrator. In a gruesome and shocking confession, Ishar Singh, a Sikh man, recounts his active participation in the brutalities of Partition to his lover Kulwant Kaur. (…) Ishar Singh initiates sexual foreplay but discovers to his consternation that he is unable to perform adequately. When his jealous lover, convinced that he had betrayed her for another woman, stabs him with his own kirpan (dagger), he sees it as just punishment for his misdeeds. Amid many graphic images of blood sputtering from of his neck, he relates his horrifying story. For eight days, he participated in the rampant pillaging and looting of Muslim property, after which he went on to murder six Muslim men of a single family. He sexually assaulted the sole remaining 'beautiful' woman only to discover that she was a corpse 'completely cold meat.' The dreadful realization that he attempted necrophilic rape traumatizes him, while the coldness of

Women survivors of male aggression in *Jhuṭhā sac* repeatedly discuss suicide as a possible end to their tribulations, but *Tamas* narrates an episode of a mass suicide of a group of Sikh women, who are goaded into choosing death to preserve their honour (their men's honour) and religious allegiance, as "Their deaths corroborate the ideology that the honour of the community lay in protecting its women from the patriarchal violence of an alien community" (Butalia 1998: 213). This incident, like some other events narrated by Sahni as taking place in the fictious North Indian town, draw on historical events of the Rawalpindi riots, in particular the mass suicide of Sikh women in the village Thoa Khalsa (cf. Pandey 2001: 90). In the novel, once it is attacked by the Muslims, the Sikh community of the village gathers in the gurdwara. The omniscient narrator describes in great detail how the sense of the glorious past imbued with sacrifice and martyrdom of the Sikhs is repeatedly evoked among the members of the community that took refuge in the gurudwara and is trying to find succour in prayer.

> Every man and woman felt in every fibre of his or her being that this was yet another moment of crisis in the long chain of Sikh history when they too must enter the field of battle just as their forebears had done before them. (…)
>
> The mood in the gurudwara was as heavy as rain-bearing clouds. Everyone swayed their heads in prayer, focusing on their collective past: the feeling of sacrifice, the Muslim enemy; shields, swords; the prasad to the guru; the unbroken unity with tradition.[35] (Sahni 2016: 230, 232)

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the female corpse passes into his own body, rendering him sexually incapable. The chilling last line of the narrative encapsulates the invasion of trauma from victim to perpetrator: 'Kulwant Kaur placed her hand on Ishar Singh's hand which was even colder than ice.'"

[35] pratyek nar-nārī kā rom-rom is bāt ko mahsūs kar rahā thā ki sikh itihās kī lambī śṛnkhalā mẽ vah bhī ek kaṛī hai jo is sankaṭ ke samay apne purkhāõ hī kī bhẽti ātm-balidān ke lie maidān mẽ utar rahā hai. (…) gurudvāre ka māhaul bhāre bādlõ jaisā gambhīr ho rahā thā. kirtān mẽ sabhī ke sir jhum rahe the, sabhī kī cetnā mẽ ve sabhī bātẽ thĩ jo dūr atīt mẽ huā kartī thĩ, balīdān kī bhāvnā, musalmān śatru, ḍhāl-talvār, guru kā prasād, akhand ektā (…). (Sahni 2011: 208, 210)

Martyrdom is an important trope of Sikh identity discourse (see Maria Puri's article in this volume) and Sahni is aware of that. It seems that the narrator veils the event in the aura of religious elation, perhaps in this manner addressing the near impossibility of understanding women's willingness to kill themselves, "(…) at that moment a stream of woman emerged into the night, resplendent in gleaming white. Jasbir Kaur walked in front, eyes half-closed, face glowing. (…) All their faces shone as they walked from the gurudwara as though under a spell" (Sahni 2016: 289); *usī vakt gurudware mẽ se ujle kapṛõ mẽ malbūs striyō kī ek ḍār-sī niklī. āge-āge jasbīr kaur thī, adhmũdī ãkhẽ, tamtamātā cehrā. sabhī ke cehre tamtā rahe the. mantrmugdh-sī ve gurudwāre mẽ se nikaltī ā rahī thĩ̄* (Sahni 2011: 261). However, when the scene of the self-inflicted death unfolds, the narrator—turning into a bystander—relates in detail the sequence of events that can be observed when women are still visible and the sounds that can be heard once they jump into the well,

> Jasbir Kaur was the first to jump in. She recited no slogan, called out to no one, but merely spoke the words, 'Vahe Guru' and jumped. As soon as she jumped many other women climbed onto the plinth as well. First Hari Singh's wife stood on the plinth, then she pulled her four-year-old son up with her. They jumped together, she pulling him by the hand. Deva Singh's wife jumped in holding her baby to her breast. Prem Singh's wife jumped in herself, but her son stood back. Gyan Singh's wife pushed him in after his mother. In moments, dozens of village women had jumped into the well with their children.
>
> When the Turks actually advanced on the gurudwara from the left entrance (…) trampling over corpses, there wasn't a single woman in the building but from inside the well came the sound of the crying and screaming and fussing of children. The shrieks of drawing women and children mingled with cries of 'Allahu Akbar' and 'Sat siri akal' echoing all through the village. (Sahni 2016: 290)[36]

[36] *sabse pahle jasbīr kaur kuẽ mẽ kūd gaī. usne koī nārā nahĩ̄ lagāyā, kisī ko pukārā nahĩ̄, keval 'vāh guru' kahā aur kūd gaī. uske kūdte hī kuẽ ki jagat par kitnī hī striyā̃ caṛh gaĩ̄. harisiṁh kī patnī pahle jagat ke ūpar jākar khaṛī ho gaī, phir usne*

By listing women along with their children and by putting on record their husbands' names, the narrator withholds women's individual identity and employs a form of address that would be used by their families and in public. Though this is the traditional way of speaking about husband or wife in the presence of others, in this instance it might also be viewed as a narrative mechanism that foregrounds cultural links between women's chastity not only with the sacrosanct principles of the Sikh faith, but also with their husbands' and their families' honour. This specific incident of a large-scale gendered violence is the only one described at such length in the novel, almost as if narrator was trying to get to the core of it and was inviting readers to do the same.

The narrative seems to juxtapose the euphoric framing of the sacrifice of the Sikh women and certain narrative pathos of the relevant passages with the repeated, forthright depiction—in later sections—of scattered artefacts that belonged to these women and of the decaying, bloating corpses. The mass suicide is further contextualised from two different perspectives in the tales of the two husbands, who present themselves to Ãkṛā Bābū (Statistics Clerk), the clerk at the welfare office to report deaths of their wives. The first one comes constantly because he can neither comprehend nor reconcile himself with the fact that his wife and son have died in the well and hopes that they might still be found somewhere. The second, however, frequents the office asking to be taken to the well so that he can recover gold bangles from his wife's corpse; ready to mutilate her body if needed, he promises the officer in charge a fair share. Sahni again, without any overt authorial commentary, manages to showcase different approaches to

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cār sāl ke beṭe ko khĩckar ūpar caṛhā liyā, phir ek sāth hī use hāth se khĩctī huī nīce kūd gaī. devsiṁh kī gharvālī apne dūdh pīte bacce ko chātī se lagāe hī kūd gaī. premsiṁh kī patnī khud to kūd gaī, par uskā baccā pīche kharā rah gayā. use gyānsiṁh kī patnī ne mã̃ ke pās dhakelkar pahũcā diyā. dekhte hī gã̃v kī dasiyõ auratẽ apne baccõ ko lekar kuẽ mẽ kūd gaĩ. / jab turk sacmuc gali ke bāyẽ sire se lāśõ ko raũdte hue gurudwāre kī or baṛhne lage to gurudwāre mẽ ek bhī strī nahĩ thī, kuẽ ke andar se cillāne-cīkhne kī āvāzẽ, baccõ ke bikṛāṭ sunāī dete rahe. gã̃v ke pās jagah-jagah se "allāh-ho-akbar" aur "sat siri akāl" ke nārõ ke sāth kuẽ mẽ se ḍūbtī auratō aur baccõ kī cīkhẽ mil gaī thĩ (Sahni 2011: 262).

the notions of community's honour, the narratives of female martyrdom and men's attitudes to both.

Willingness of women to sacrifice their lives to preserve honour internalized as that of their husbands', families' and religious communities' is yet again nuanced in the novel by another tale—of an assaulter, who brags to his companions about a woman offering herself in exchange for saving her life, "The bitch was yelling, 'Don't kill me, you seven can keep me with you, do whatever you want, one at a time, just don't kill me'" (Sahni 2016: 288); *"harāmzādī kahī jā rahī thī, mujhe māro nahĩ, mujhe tum sātõ apnne pās rakh lo, ek-ek karke jo cāho kar lo. mujhe māro nahĩ*" (Sahni 2011: 258). She is stabbed to death by her attacker and condescendingly described by him as a woman from the Bāgrī community, a nomadic tribe. This fact, in the eyes of the killer, was perhaps the reason for her indecent offer and is given as an excuse for the killing.

Unlike in *Jhuṭhā sac*, where violence was foregrounded within the storyline of Tārā's experiences, in *Tamas* the narratives of violence against women constitute mainly a part of larger narrative of communal violence. The brutality of the gang-rape of the Hindu girl could be read along the viciousness of three other horrifying incidents of ruthless killings, i.e., murder of the domestic servant of a Hindu couple by their Muslim friend, the killing of a Muslim perfume-seller by a Hindu boy, or the murder of Jarnail calling for communal peace among the rioters as discussed earlier. These incidents are terrifying for the innocent victims do not expect the attack, they are friends with their killers; furthermore, the acts of violence are distributed among the representatives of all three communities. Sahni, in contrast to Yashpal, does not provide moral or didactic authorial commentaries, including those disguised as words spoken by the characters or chronicled as their thoughts. He narrates the tale of the pre-partition hostilities as a series of violent events, where brutality is on the rise in tune with the escalation of the riot frenzy, leading to a narrative crescendo of violence.

The aesthetics and narrative complexity of *Tamas* corresponds well with Roadarmel's characterization of

> nāī kahānī as the heightened questioning of values, the disillusion, the alienation, the introduction of previously taboo subjects, reflection of modern consciousness, experimental narrative patterns. (Roadarmel 1972: 5)

Likewise, Kumar's remarks on the same literary trend accentuate the need for unconventional, experimental narratives, because

> the fragmentation of psyche (…) could no longer be presented through traditional fiction wherein the image of order and harmony was maintained consistently. (Kumar 1990: 12)

Tamas ends with a coda that describes how the riots peter out and come to an end, but even then, the violence against women still lingers in the realm of possibility, which is exemplified by the incident of the Sikh husband ready to dismember the corpse of his wife, one of those who sacrificed her life for the idea of family's and community's honour, to retrieve gold ornaments she wore. This coda has *Tamas* end bitterly with a scene of all prominent members of various parties touring together the town devasted by the riots which, to start with, were the outcome of their own manipulations, and raising loud slogans of peace and harmony. It is a mockery of Jairnal's earnest and failed peace campaign and a disillusioning ending for those reading with a hindsight and knowing well that the communal violence was not confined to 1947 but keeps on breaking out again and again in the independent India as well. As said by Sahni in an interview,

> I did not try to analyse the causes of partition in *Tamas.* I was only interested in describing the incidents I had seen and heard about. I was also trying to record what people thought and felt at that time. If you, however, want to know my own opinions about what happened and why, I still may not be able to tell you. All I can say is that as a humanist and a writer I cherish certain values and modes of behaviour. I deplore the killing that took place. It was shameful that a large population should have indulged in so much violence (Bhalla 2001).

Turning now to another writer who had witnessed partition violence, namely Krishna Sobti, I analyse how she, in her autobiography-inspired novel which revisits the partition, narrates gendered aggression.

An intimate tale: *Gujrāt pakistān se gujrāt hindustān*

In her last, largely autobiographical novel, *Gujrāt pakistān se gujrāt hindustān* (2017), Sobti presents readers with personal reminiscences and reflections on the partition. Published six decades after the event, the book was written with a hindsight informed by all that have transpired in her life and in her creative career during the long intervening period. The novel switches between the first- and third-person narration and gives an account of Sobti's thoughts on the aftermath of the partition; plight of the refugees, including her and her relatives scattered all over India; and the trauma of violence. As the storyline corresponds to Sobti's biography, the novelistic narrative can be located within the fold of life writings.

Maria Skakuj-Puri (2018) has already analysed the novel and some other writings of Sobti on the partition and akin themes, hence in this part I will mainly recapitulate the main points of her enquiry to accentuate the narratives of violence against women in the novel. *Gujrāt…* refers to and contextualises Sobti's earlier tales of the partition, i.e., her seminal short stories: "Ḍaro mat, maĩ tuhmhārī rakṣā karū̃gā" ("Do not be afraid, I will protect you," 1950) and "Sikkā badal gayā." Skakuj-Puri (2018: 189)[37] describes the book thus,

> … 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 (…). When extracted from the whole and pursued in an unbroken sequence,

[37] Titles of both short stories as well as circumstances of their origin and publication are mentioned in the novel (Sobti 2017: 40; 121; see below); development of "Sikkā…"'s plot is alluded to in the novel when it narrates the story of protagonist's paternal grandmother's escape from her farm (Sobti 2017: 29).

> 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.

Compared with the galloping storyline of *Jhuṭhā sac* and the growing--in-the-intensity plot of *Tamas*, Sobti's novel seems uneventful. It tells the story of a young woman who, displaced from Lahore shortly before the partition, leaves her family home in Delhi to take the job as a tutor to a child prince in the state of Sirohi in Rajasthan. Subsequently the state becomes a part of the independent India. The book ends with the protagonist returning to Delhi. The story develops slowly, but the first-cum-third-person narrator shares personal reflections and observations typical of a memoir that feature voices from the past and images that appear as dream-like fantasy sequences. With great narrative craftsmanship Sobti creates a mood that along with the development of the plot turns from the oppressive to liberating.

Sobti focuses on the experience of migration, uprootedness, and uncertainty in the life of a woman protagonist, other migrants, and those living through a political change whereby Sirohi turns from being a princely state into an integral part of the now sovereign, democratic India. The protagonist opts for an independent life, away from her family, her choices of both leaving for Sirohi and returning to Delhi foreground her agency and subjectivity despite difficult circumstances. However, this dominant narrative is interwoven with echoes of the partition mayhem that return in conversations of episodic characters who have experienced it personally, and in the nightmares and visions that haunt the main protagonist. The narrator repeatedly orders the oneiric apparitions to go back to the place they lived in when still alive, now in Pakistan, "Go over there, dreams, scram! What is the point of peeking over there, now that you have changed your disguise to fit in here?" (Sobti 2021: 107)*; sapno, jāo vahī̃ jāo! yahā̃ bhes badalkar vahā̃ ṭāk-jkā̃k karne se kyā fāydā?* (Sobti 2017: 119). Memories of the places left behind and the attending traumas are likewise repeatedly addressed, e.g., "Shake off those sights those memories. Throw them

away. Go to sleep" (Sobti 2021: 19); *un dṛśyõ ko, un yādõ ko jhaṭak do. apne se pare phaṭak do. so jāo*, (Sobti 2017: 29).

The most conspicuous of those chronicles of terror is a fragmented story of a brutal mutilation and murder of the main protagonist's childhood friend, Bimbo, which is narrated in three passages scattered throughout the novel (Sobti 2017: 12, 103–104, 121). At the very onset of the story, readers encounter a veiled mention of it, when the narrator describes the inflow of refugees to Delhi, all of them carrying their scarce possessions alongside memories of atrocities, and of those left behind. The narrator remarks,

> Defeated, all of them with their bundles, their discoloured old trunks, their filthy dupattas, their faces—blazing with impotent rage—paralysed by a murderous hatred now cooled. One is stuck with a face of young son, another with the branded tin bangles of the daughter: Oh lord, have mercy—her arms! Some recall elderly parents left behind. Homes turned to loony bins, all thanks to politics. The whole city full of beings ejected from their homes. Full of human rags. (Sobti 2021: 4)[38]

The metonymy treats the tattered luggage carried by the refugees and the burden of their difficult experiences as one, a compelling narrative strategy. A reference to Bimbo's tragedy[39]—"the branded tin bangles of the daughter: Oh lord, have mercy—her arms!"—is oblique and can only be comprehended after readers learn of the brutality of her killing from later passages, which are analysed by Skakuj-Puri as follows,

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[38] *hāre hue ye sab log, aur unke bucke, poṭliyā̃, badrang purānī sandūkiyā̃, gaṭhriyā̃, maile-adhmaile dupaṭṭe, cehre—piṭī huī nafrat se tapte hue—koī ṭhaṇḍī huī khū̃khār nafrat se niḍhāl, koī javān beṭī ke bichuṛe cehre ke sath saṭā—koī beṭī ke rāngle cūṛõ par salākhõ ko gondte hue—hāy o rabbā—uskī bā̃hẽ—koī pīche chūt gae būṛhe mā̃-bāp ko yād kartā—gharõ ko pagalkhānā banā diyā—siyāsat ne. sārā śahar bharā hai apne-apne gharõ se phenke gae vajudõ se. insānī cithṛõ se* (Sobti 2017: 12–13).

[39] In Skakuj-Puri's translation of this passage, the reference to gendered violence is even more graphic: "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!" Forthcoming.

> (…) the spectre of Bimbo, a childhood friend, visits the narrator in a haunting dream, (…), and recounts her tale of woe: on the wedding night she and her newly-wed husband were attacked by a slogan-shouting, bloodthirsty mob, which took her away, chopped off her arms still adorned with wedding bangles, and finally killed her (…). 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 (…). Nightmares seem to plague the narrator every time she closes her eyes, in her own bed, during train-travel, in fact whenever her weary eyelids droop. Anything and everything trigger 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. (Skakuj-Puri 2018: 190–191)

The protagonist-cum-narrator is haunted by recurring images of atrocities, troubled by a sense of uncertainty and danger, and that is where the overall oppressive mood of opening passages of the novel originates from.

Repeated reminiscences of the partition violence that killed Bimbo and many others, are evoked as images and echoes in slogans shouted by the bloodthirsty mobs and recalled by Bimbo's ghost—shouts of "Allah Akbar" and "Har har Mahadev" (*allāh-o-akbar; har-har-mahādev*, Sobti 2017: 14–19). The same phantom voices torment the protagonist when she walks the streets of Delhi earlier in the novel—"Har hah Mahadev! The bloodthirsty voices of Lahore seemed present here as well" (Sobti 2021: 3; *har-har-mahādev—lahaur vālī avāzõ kī khūnī laṛāī,* Sobti 2017: 11). The shouts hint at the danger of a possible assault, with her as the target, which becomes evident from a warning voice coming from the vicinity of the step-well, "Someone might kill you! Understand, little girl." (Sobti 2021: 3; *koī mār phenk degā! samjhī muniyā!*; Sobti 2017: 11).[40] These phantom voices, like

[40] Cf. Skakuj-Puri's translation of these sentences, "She was walking fast in the direction of home when from the step-well sitting quietly at the back of Hailey

phantom images, resonate with dangers and the impossibility of safety, building an overall suffocating mood of the novel's early parts. Likewise meaning is given to some specific places where the violent events unfolded, like Delhi whose streets the female protagonist walks.

When the protagonist is confronted with the mother of Bimbo, the narrative switches between the first—and the third person as if one needed distancing in moments that are more emotionally challenging. Remarkably, the mother in mourning is not concerned with the notions of preserving honour of Hindu community and family; she wishes her daughter were alive even if she were to live as a person of a different religion,

> Her heart had been shaken when she'd seen Beembo's mother weeping and beating her breast. Her daughter—my childhood friend—never made it to the soil of Mother India. Her complexion, bright as white milk, her golden hair and this eyelash.
>
> Her mother beat her chest and wailed, 'Alas, you enemies, better you had kept her there! You could have converted and dressed her differently! Why did you have to cut off her arms!'
>
> And she remembered that night still hung suspended before her eyes, when she'd returned home and written out the story 'Fear Not, I Will Protect You!' in her writing pad and sent it to Pratik the next afternoon.
>
> When Beembo's mother arrived, her weeping shook each and every of them. She beat her breasts and cursed Nehru, Jinnnah, and Gandhi making everyone upset! (Sobti 2021: 107–108)[41]

Road an old, wise voice rose to admonish her—'This is not the time to take the air. You will get yourself killed. Try to understand, child.'" Forthcoming.

[41] *bimbo kī mā̃ ko rote-pīṭte dekh uskā dil dahal gayā thā. uskī beṭī aure mere bacpan kī sahelī bhārat mā̃ kī dhartī tak nahī̃ pahũc sakī. ciṭṭā dūdh uskā rang-sunahrī bāl aur ghanīlī ā̃khē! /mā̃ chātī pīṭkar ro paṛtī, hāy duśmanõ use vahī̃ rakh liyā hotā! uskā colā badal diyā hotā. uskī bā̃hē kyõ kaṭ phēkī? / use yād āyī—ā̃khõ ke āge laṭak gayi vah rāt, jab usne ādhī rāt ko lauṭkar rāiṭing-paiḍ par 'ḍaro mat, maĩ tumhārī rakṣā karū̃gā!' kahānī likhī thī aur aglī dupahar 'pratīk' ko bhejī thī./ bimbo kī mā̃ kā āgman. rone-karlāne kī āvazẽ ek-ek ko dahlā gaī̃. chātī pīṭ- pīṭkar nehru, jinnā ko galiyā̃ detī ne sab ko ḍā̃vaḍol kar diyā thā* (Sobti 2017: 121). Please note the discrepancy in spelling of Bimbo's name in Rockwell's translation and in the spelling that I am using in the article.

Resentment of Bimbo's mother towards politicians she holds responsible for the partition is repeatedly ascribed to the shared experience of migrants, like these from the Kingsway refugee camp in Delhi where the protagonist volunteers for some time, "Some weep, some sob. And some curse those who agreed to Partition" (Sobti 2021): 43; *kabhī siskiyā̃, kabhī hickiyā̃. aur kabhī bāṭvāre par rāzī honevālõ ko galiyā̃* (Sobti 2017: 72).

Partition in *Gujrāt…* is told by the means of polyphonous experiences of refugees, its survivors and victims, but mainly by dint of personal, haunting memories of the main protagonist, which are strongly affected by violence, including that against women. Skakuj-Puri, after Bernard (2010), proposes to look at *Gujrāt…* as fragmented narrative with traces of Bildingsroman, and argues for "giv[ing] its author the credit of having reworked the trauma within the narrative itself" (Skakuj-Puri 2018: 188).

A tale of freedom undeterred by restrictions: *Ret samādhi*

Shree (2018: 5) dedicates her novel to Sobti, whom she considers her literary mentor. The character of Sobti appears in the Wagah border scene discussed above; her two novels, i.e., *Zindagīnāmā* and *Gujrāt*… are mentioned in the text. In its third part, *Ret samādhi* provides glimpses of narratives on the partition violence against women in a manner different from the novels analysed above. Like in Sobti's tale, the measure of the narrative space dedicated to gendered aggression is miniscule in view of the complete length of the text.

Shree's novel is an epic tale of a middle-class family in the very contemporary and global India; the main protagonists are Ammā̃, the octogenarian widowed mother; her daughter and son; son's wife; their two grown up sons. It showcases many a satirical scene from the lives of Delhi's middle-class, in particular, a government official and his family, along with a cohort of their domestic help. There is the rebellious, bohemian sister. And there is the widowed mother, who though initially seems to turn away from life after her husband's death,

gradually transforms herself and thrives on the idea of revisiting her past. The novel seems to thrive on the conflicts within the family—between siblings who choose different lifestyles, between husband and wife, and between parents and children. It also gives voice to a plethora of non-human, unexpected characters, like roads, walls, doors, insects, chrysanthemums, etcetera, whose impact on the unfolding of the tale is often seen as crucial. However, continuing ramifications of the partition, its violence and borders drawn in the name of communal hatred shape culminating moments of the novel.

Throughout the tale, border stands for the symbolic image, metaphor and metonymy of the partition and the whole plethora of various restrictions; it is alluded to from the very beginning of the story (Shree 2018: 9–10), along with the consequences of trespassing it. However, the full extent of the impact of the partition on mother's life is unveiled in the final third part and comes as a surprise both to the daughter and the readers. It is there we learn that Ammā̃ had crossed the border (all borders) because she wanted to revisit her past that was unknown to her children and shrouded in silence as long as her husband lived. The erased past is narrated in a fragmented manner, not chronologically but in bits and pieces and through constant allusions. Moreover, from excerpts narrated in the text, we do not acquire the full knowledge of the sequence of events, there are cracks in the tale, some events remain veiled in obliqueness. To some extent this manner of narrating corresponds to how stories of the partition, and in particular, of its gendered violence, were passed on to the next generations, with silences and gaps, with reluctance and trepidation, and at times thoroughly erased, buried deeply in memories, never exposed, and ultimately silenced with the survivors' deaths. While Sobti narrates her own experience of the partition, Shree writes an intragenerational tale.

It is in these narrative bits and fragments of *Ret samādhi*, filled with inconsistencies, that the story of young Ammā̃'s love marriage to a Muslim man, her sudden abduction that separated the couple for ever, her escape through the desert, her hiding and starving, the dangers she faced and the hardships she endured are narrated. The daughter

believes that her mother's urge to visit Pakistan is connected to Rosie, her mother's transgender friend and his/her past, and not a past of her own. It is only when Ammā̃ walks the streets of Lahore with her eyes closed in an attempt to find her maternal grandfather's house (Shree 2018: 287–278) that the daughter, along with the readers, discovers fragmented truth of her mother's pre-partition life.

Like in Sobti's narrative filled with haunting echoes and phantom images of the partition, there are hints of partition violence from the onset of *Ret samādhi*, but these allusions become evident only when the narrative describes events that took place in Pakistan, like in the passage speaking of what the road that witnessed violence sweeping over the caravans of refugees, remembers: "In the gloom of the gale father cut off his own daughter's head and a husband pulled the pestle from among the pots and pans on his wife's head and beat her to death" (Shree 2019: 381); *ãdhaṛ ke ãdhere mẽ bāp ne apnī hī beṭī kā sir kalam kar diyā aur pati ne apnī hī patnī apnī hī patnī ke sir par rakhe bartan bhā̃ḍe mẽ se mūsal khī̃c patnī ko de mārā*, (Shree 2018: 280). The gruesome murders hint at honour killings of women during the partition's communal strife.

Narrative of Ammā̃'s abduction and escape during the partition are showcased in four passages numerated and subtitled as stories within the novel, i.e. *The First Tale: Tales* (Shree 2019: 407–410); *pahlī kahānī—'kahāniyā̃*' (Shree 2018: 299–302); *The Second Tale: the Buddha and the Girl* (Shree 2019: 411–414); *dūsrī kahānī—murti aur vah laṛkī* (Shree 2018: 302–306); *The Third Tale: The Sea of Sand* (Shree 2019: 415–417); *tisrī kahānī—ret samundar* (Shree 2018: 306–308); and *The Fourth Tale: The Drowned* (Shree 2019: 418–420); *cauthī kahānī: ḍūbõ kā honā* (Shree 2018: 308–310). The stylistic device of outlining these tales as embedded stories or 'stories-within-story,' and providing them with discrete titles as if they were ancient fables from the oral or textual lore of India, else Scheherazade's tales, foregrounds their metanarrative and recurrent character, both as the experiences of gendered violence and its accounts.

Shree finds an idiom that translates the unspeakable violence into pulsating prose, like in this scene of Ammā̃'s abduction,

> Lifts her. Throws her down. Truck. Or what? One or two more masked men. In the truck, girls. Like her: sixteen. Seventeen. Eighteen. Weeping. Snivelling. One on top of another. Sheep goats. Insects. She bites a hand. The masked man slaps her. Terrifying eyes. Bloodshot. A lump on his forehead. Skin parched black like he got burnt dragging her through the fires.
>
> Darkness. A tarp thrown over them. They are buried beneath. The girls scream. Clawing. Sink beneath the tarp. Darkness. Heavy things fall onto the tarp, thud thud. The girls beneath. Suffocating, suppressed. Dying. Unconscious. Some crying. Some silent. Blind. She too.
>
> Noise. Or quiet.[42] (Shree 2019: 408)

The tale of kidnapping is narrated here differently than the earlier accounts of violence found in the other novels in focus. Apart from revealing just fragments and leaving many gaps, Shree's style reflects abruptness and ruthlessness of the experience. Sentences are short, they often consist of just one word, some of them are gerund clauses, there are many onomatopoeias. The narrative focuses on the sequence of events through sounds and images that cannot be forgotten even after many years, for instance, "Terrifying eyes. Bloodshot. A lump on his forehead. Skin parched black like he got burnt dragging her through the fires." Terror of the abducted women is underscored by focus on the basic bodily responses to trauma of the unknown and of the possible further physical and sexual assault. The captive women are treated like animals—sheep or insects, in face of danger they respond instinctively like animals too—the protagonist bites her abductor's hand. The overpowering fear does not permit women to share stories of their misfortunes and create camaraderie of survivors known from *Jhuṭhā sac*.

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[42] *uṭhāyā. paṭkā. ṭrak. yā kyā. ek ki do aur paṭṭādhārī. ṭrak mẽ laṛkiyẽ̃. usī jaisī. solah. sattrah. unnīs. rotī. bisūrtī. ek par ek. bheṛ bakriyẽ̃. kīṛiyā.usne hāth kāṭā. paṭṭādhārī ne cẽ̃ṭạ lagāyā. ãkhẽ ḍarāvnī. ḍore lāl, māthe par gūmaṛ. āg mẽ use ghasīṭte lāne mẽ jal gayā ho, aīs bhusā rang./ãdherā. ūpar ṭāṭ ḍāl diyā. unhẽ nīce gāṛ diyā. laṛkiyẽ̃ cikhtĩ. noctĩ. ṭāṭ mẽ dhãsĩ. ãdherā. ṭāṭ par bhārī sāmān ladd phadd gire. laṛkiyẽ̃ nice. ghuṭṭĩ, dabtĩ. martĩ. behoś. koī ro rahĩ. koī cup. ãdhī paṛī. vo bhī. śor. ki cup.* Shree 2018: 300.

The narrator, or Ammā̃, who recalls what happened in the past, concentrates on terror, physical proximity of the abducted women, their loneliness in moments of utter despair, snapshots of images and sounds of approaching dangers—everything is written on the body and remembered by the body that has lived through the trauma of violence—corporeal vicinity of other abducted women, images and sounds of the abductors and the abduction. The horror of the experience is mirrored by the palpitating cadences of Shree's prose.

Ammā̃'s decision to cross the border and her search for the man to whom she was married once speak of her agency and taking control of her life. Her death as the result of this choice is in fact alluded to in the opening passages of the book, in scenes where she asks her daughter to mount a mock attack and let her practice falling on her back (Shree 2018: 12). Though these scenes seem obscure and ironic and are initially read as eccentricities of an elderly woman, right up to the passage that narrates what transpired after Ammā̃'s search for her Muslim husband is complete, it is evident that from the onset of the narrative she was willing to pay the highest price for immersing herself in the past and reuniting with her first love even if briefly. She does it to re-live the past, but also to explain herself to those from her past that she felt she had abandoned and needed to reconnect with. Her first husband son's is a witness to the scene of reunion and observes, "His father's hand was in Ma's. You didn't come, Ma said, I forgive you. I didn't come, do forgive me" (Shree 2019: 475); *unke vālid kā hāth mā̃ ke hāth mẽ thā. tum nahī̃ āye, mā̃ ne kahā, tumhẽ māf kiyā. maĩ nahī̃ āyī, tum mujhe māf kar do* (Shree 2018: 354).

That freedom of choice that Amma ultimately opted for is closely connected with the omniscient narrator's reinterpretation of what borders should stand for,

> A border, gentlemen, is for crossing.
>
> A border says jump. It's there to tempt you to cross it, come back, play, smile, welcome, meet greet create.
>
> A border is fun to cross. All give-and-take goes on there. The border exists to connect, one to another. If there's one, there's another. Through

> love. If you hate, the blood that flows through arteries to deliver strength from here to there will flow out and away; each side will die bit by bit. What fool would want this?[43] (Shree 2019: 447)

It appears that in her intertextual and intragenerational narrative of the partition Shree takes a stand which is informed, to some extent, by the contemporary developments and unabating animosity between India and Pakistan, and various other conflict zones of the world. She elucidates this thus, (…) "this is not just the Partition of India and Pakistan that we are talking about, look at the world, divisions seem to have become such a big thing suddenly" (Shree, interview with Browarczyk, forthcoming), bringing "the personal is political" perspective into play.

Conclusions

The costs of unhealed trauma of the partition violence are borne not only by the survivors but also by the next generations. Undoubtedly, "fiction, in both literature and film, was the arena in which the most sustained engagement with the human cost of the partition took place" (Bernard 2010: 13). This paper tried to explore how four Hindi novels written across six decades have narrated violence against women; gendered aggression is topos of all of them, however its place within plots, narrative strategies and aesthetics employed by writers to narrate it vary.

Yashpal foregrounds gendered violence while narrating Tārā's life, as the continuum of intensifying violence is the main factor that propels the protagonist's storyline in the novel. *Jhuṭhā sac*, which "is

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[43] *sarhad, bhalemānas, pār karne kī cīz hai./bārḍar māne kūdo. hai hī ki lẽgho, lauṭo, khelo, muskarā ke svāgat karo, vahẽ milo raco./ mazā hai use lẽghne mẹ. sārā len den vahĩ hotā hai. sarhad apne ko darśātī hai dūsre se rābtā karne, ek hai to dūsrā haĩ. mohabbat mẽ./ nafrat mẽ ho gaye to jo khūn tākat pahũcāne idhar se udhar dhamniyõ se jātā hai vo chiṭak jāega aur bahegā, donõ ãg tiltil marẽge. ye kaun bevakūf cāhegā?* Shree 2019: 332.

not merely [literary creation] but socio-political commentary, critique of Partition" (Yadav 2025: 128), gives detailed account of various forms and scenarios of violence against women during the partition, e.g., abductions, forced suicides, murders, sexual violence, and forced recovery, but likewise explores the more subtle forms of gendered violence contextualized within the structural or social norms and ideals of female behaviour. Thus, the way Yashpal narrates gendered violence proves that

> Moments of rupture and extreme dislocation, extraordinary as they are, underscore the more daily doses of violence against women and enable us to see them as part of continuum-and, despite the shudder of horror, part of the consensus (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 60).

Yashpal remains true to literary realism, but in his quest to sensitise readers towards the subject, he is unapologetically didactic hence the successful 'return' of Tārā as a survivor of violence to society, and the role she is willing to play for India's progress, can also be seen in this light. Strategically, Yashpal gives voice to women characters who have survived violence; the tales are framed as their testimonies.

Tamas locates violence against women within the discourse of political manipulation where

> asymmetrical economic relations between the two communities aligned with prejudice and deep-seated antagonism led to the unfurling of a brutal logic of violent reprisal that marked the bodies of women during the Partition (Arora 2020: 38).

Reporting on instances of unimaginable viciousness, Sahni employs a novel narrative strategy: he makes perpetrators of violence brag about their exploits; hence, he narrates instances of violence against women through a perspective of oppressors and spectators. In this manner, disillusioned with Indian democracy after the three decades of independence, without authorial, didactic commentaries, he describes the condition of the Indian state and society and of women as

its citizens. While presenting the account of mass suicide of the Sikh women, he takes a stand on the 'betrayal of women' as

> for many women (…), the violence of the Partition lay not only in what happened to them in the riots and the brutal violation of their bodies but also in what they had to witness – the possibility of betrayal coded in their everyday relations (Das 2006: 218),

and makes an effort to understand this form of gendered violence. Sahni thus seems to ponder over positioning of women as citizens of India in the context of such a social and cultural conditioning. Intricacy of *Tamas'* narrative corresponds to the entanglement of groups and individuals in conflict during the riot; its forthright aesthetics reflects disillusionment with democracy and with the unchanging fabric of Indian society, where political manipulations trigger communal tensions.

Images and echoes of the partition haunt the protagonist of the autobiographical novel by Sobti. Though narratives of gendered violence are scattered and fragmented throughout the text, they nevertheless attest to the unspeakable forms of aggression during those times. Sobti returns to themes known form her earlier writings; in fact, titles of both her acclaimed partition short stories, along with the circumstances of their origin, are described in the novel. In this manner Sobti indicates her personal concern with the subject. Her novelistic narrative foregrounds the impact of gendered violence on those who witnessed it and survived as victims. Menon and Bhasin (1998: 45) reflected:

> how many [women] had been forced to die—at the hands of men in their own families, or by their own hands. Poisoned, strangled or burnt to death, put to sword, drowned. It was made clear to them that death was preferable to 'dishonour.'

It seems that for Sobti, the repeated act of narrating violence from her personal perspective, is an act of reclaiming subjectivity, considering that "Both state and community, in claiming the victim, end up

simulating the suffering of the victim and thereby making it the victim of their own discourse" (Das 1995: 209).

Shree narrates the partition and its violence intertextually and intragenerationally. The first approach invokes various authors, their writings on the partition in Hindi, Urdu and English, and characters whom these works feature. To an extent, it also includes a cohort of posthuman narrators whose insights shape the tale in very experimental ways. The second tactic focuses on the story of Ammã̃ and how the next generations: son, daughter, grandchildren, learn about the unspoken past and the pre-independence love marriage that ended abruptly with her abduction, her escape and her life in the post-independent India. Both manners of narrating partition are also instrumental in Shree's debate with present discourses of an individual versus family, community, state, since

> (…) time of partition and after suggests, the protection, assault, abduction, and recovery of their bodies underscores how their figuration in nationalist discourse is key to understanding this history and its implications for the present (Didur 2007; 14–15).

The stylistic devices employed by Shree to narrate instances of violence against women translate it into unique pulsating prose where the narrative of the violence is fragmentary, at times breached or even abruptly broken.

Novels in focus speak of the unspeakable and narrate violence against women during the partition by way of distinctive styles and strategies as hallmark of the traumatic past. Das (1995: 184) comments:

> It is this fact—that violence annihilates language, that terror cannot be brought into the realms of the utterable—which invites us to constitute the body as the mediating sign between the individual and society, and between the past and the present.

For all that, the authors of the novels in focus attempt to translate traumatic experiences of women into an utterable form of literary works,

from around the partition times till the present, as it is through such literary attempts that the trauma experienced by the witnesses and the survivors heals and so does its post-memory in the next generations.

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