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Article

Postmodern Dialogics and the Politics of Representation in Indian Subcontinent Literature

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Abstract: This paper critically explores the deployment of various literary devices in fictional narratives that engage with human decadence and sectarian violence, particularly the communal holocausts surrounding the 1947 division of the Indian subcontinent and the demolition of the Babri Mosque in the early 1990s. These historical events, though marked outwardly by religious fervor, are revealed in the selected novels—Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja* (1993), Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1988), Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* (2001), Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1988)—to be primarily constructed by human agency, political manipulation, and collective hysteria. Employing narrative strategies such as the dissemination of rumor, grotesque and black humor, structural and verbal irony, allegory, and the evocation of pathos, these writers vividly render the degeneration of individuals into mere communal signifiers and the ensuing rupture of the social fabric. These literary devices, when viewed through the theoretical frameworks of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism and Jean-François Lyotard's micronarratives, expose the constructedness of dominant ideologies and dismantle grand historical narratives, thereby validating multiple subjectivities and subaltern voices. This dialogic structure, as evident in the polyphonic interplay of narrative perspectives, effectively critiques monologic national discourses and presents these historical ruptures not merely as isolated events but as continuing postcolonial traumas encoded in collective memory.

Keywords: Indian Subcontinent; Partition; Communal Violence; Literary Devices; Postcolonial Trauma; Dialogism; Micronarratives; Fictional Narratives

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Introduction

A considerable body of critical work has examined the representation of the 1947 division in literature. Scholars such as Urvashi Butalia (*The Other Side of Silence*) and Gyanendra Pandey (*Remembering Partition*) have focused on oral histories and memory to highlight the marginal voices silenced in state-sanctioned narratives. Literary critics have studied the gendered violence and postcolonial implications of fiction dealing with this period—Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, for instance, underscore the sexual violence and nationalistic tropes in this discourse. Furthermore, postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha have offered critical insights into the role of representation, hybridity, and mimicry in colonial and postcolonial texts.

While these critical interventions have enriched studies of this historical period, the role of literary devices as instruments of ideological subversion remains relatively underexplored, particularly in conjunction with postmodern theories like Bakhtinian dialogism and Lyotardian incredulity toward metanarratives. The subtle transformations of communal distrust into narrative irony and the employment of grotesque humour and allegorical violence have not been adequately examined in a comparative framework across these major South Asian novels. Furthermore, the recurrence of rumour as a narrative device with catastrophic consequences has been insufficiently theorised in light of postmodern epistemological scepticism.

This paper addresses this critical gap by demonstrating how the use of diverse literary techniques articulates a postmodern consciousness that challenges both historical finality and moral absolutism. By bringing together fiction and theory, this study emphasises the necessity of reading literature from this period not merely as a testimonial but as dialogic, performative, and structurally political, thus offering new ways of understanding representation, trauma, and collective memory in the postcolonial context.

Literary Devices and the Depiction of Communal Violence

This paper explores various devices employed in texts that deal with human decadence—specifically, the holocaust of communal violence that erupted during the 1947 division of the Indian Subcontinent and the demolition of the Babri Mosque in the early nineties.

Though a veneer of religion was manifest, communities generally lived in amity and peaceful co-existence, punctuated now and then by mutual distrust, as depicted in the selected novels. They had been caught in a Janus-faced predicament. However, in the vitiated atmosphere of profound communal antipathy, they only wanted to wreak vengeance for no sound reason. The predicament of Hindus in particular, and other non-Muslims in general, in Bangladesh, as evidenced in *Lajja* (1993), was far worse. The communal forces ran berserk, preying upon the Hindus after the demolition of the mosque. Here, the parallel with Nazi Germany is simply too obvious. State-inflicted communal terrorism made life hell for Hindus. Oblivious of their heritage and Bengali culture, some sought to transform Bangladesh into a theocratic state, thereby trampling

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upon the rights of minorities. The horrendous catastrophe, the sudden blindness, and diabolical ruses at work during these calamitous times have been described by the writers with compelling vividness, using their repertoire of artistic devices.

Many novelists who treated this theme have started from the particular, later giving it a touch of the universal. As shown in *Tamas* (1988), the cataclysmic events that seized parts of the North Western Frontier Province were the outcome of rumours. The carcass of a pig thrown on the steps of a local mosque sprouted suspicion and distrust, leading to a series of rumours. Muslims began looking askance at Hindus, and a few others, enraged, pelted stones at innocuous people of the Congress party, as Hindus fairly dominated it. The situation rapidly deteriorated. Adding fuel to the fire, one of the Sikhs who attended an assembly convened by Hindus to repel Muslim attacks inadvertently remarked: "I hear a cow has also been slaughtered. Its parts were thrown outside the Mai Sati Dharmasala. I did not know how far this is true. But I have heard people talking about it" (Bhisham Sahni.60). Upon hearing this, Vanprasthiji, a priest, tingled with anger but managed to suppress it. However, the secretary of the meeting was furious and quickly said in an impassioned voice: "If they dare slaughter a cow, rivers of blood will flow in the city (Bhisham Sahni 60). Everyone in the meeting was prone to see some deep conspiracy behind the whole thing. The meeting came to an end only after winding deliberations, resolving that Hindus and Sikhs should devise some way to protect their lives and property by acting in concert. They were determined to pile up lathis (batons) and other weaponry to face any eventuality. They did not want to be caught on the wrong foot when the time for action came. The diseased preoccupation with the putrid gutter of animosity and the irrational urge to sully their image is described with excruciating detail. The novelists suggestively aver that the eruption of evil did not have any divine sanction since it was artificial butchery in their bovine stupidity. The novelists, with their literary devices, strive towards a symphony of many notes.

In Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* (2001), one can see how rumours whip up frenzy. It all happens when two people in burkas throw bombs on a procession carried out by Hindus as part of Ram Sila Poojan. It is rumoured that it is the diabolical work of local Muslims, and immediately, riots break out. It is very contemporary, and Amitav Ghosh depicts similar patterns of violence in his novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988). Using the narrative technique of unfurling events by reading newspaper reports, Amitav Ghosh shows how communal violence spread in Calcutta and cities of erstwhile East Pakistan in 1966. As he stresses, rumour takes over. The poisoning of water, the trains of dead bodies, and all other incredible rumours further vitiate people's minds and heighten the violence. It stands to reason that communal fanatics batten on rumours and other reports doctored to suit their vile purposes. The 1947 events could be compared to the 1992 riots that broke out before and after the demolition of the Babri mosque. They all follow the same pattern: suspicion, distrust, and rumour activate conditioned minds, all sources of terrifying communal violence.

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Humour and the Deterioration of Social Relations

With the estrangement, people took each other with a grain of salt. As the air of suspicion hung, people, deriving morbid pleasure, began to poke fun at each other, and the raillery became offensive. In *Cracking India*, the subtle changes, which suddenly became conspicuous, are described through the gatherings at the Queen's Park. They engender sarcasm on religious lines. The narrator-character, Lenny, listens to their arguments and a fresh crop of malicious jokes, which have been developed to ridicule people from other religions, suddenly become everybody's favourite. Hindus, Sikhs on the one hand, and Muslims on the other, crack jokes, which are primarily intended to hurt others.

With a morbid sense of humour, the novelists reveal how the violence has severed the roots of people of different communities, irrespective of friendship and rational ideas. Malicious jokes develop only to ridicule and denigrate other religious practices, and symbols of other religions become favourite targets. Hari's tuft of hair becomes ludicrous to the Muslims in *Cracking India*. Though he is a friend, they chase him in order to pull off the piece of cloth fastened across his loins. In such descriptions, Bapsi Sidhwa resembles the horror portrayed by William Golding in *Lord of the Flies* (1954). At the end of that novel, the boys of Jack's tribe, like barbarians, get sadistic delight in hunting Ralph. The situation in Golding's work is saved, but there is no such hope for Hari, and so he converts to Islam and calls himself Himmat Ali. The plight of the Hindu Ayah is no different. She has been the cynosure of the servants and others doing petty jobs—the amorous, playful caresses of the earlier scenes become lustful, threatening, and violent.

Since the identification of religion is linked with the male sexual organ, the whole ritual becomes a source of much fun. Dreading that they would be put to death without any compunction if Muslims recognised them to be *kafirs* (idol-worshippers), the two Hindus named Arun and Suranjan in Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* devise a ruse. Before going on some important errand to the Muslim city, he whispers something to Arun, and they both laugh: "Going behind the row of tents, they pushed their foreskins up" (174) as their life depends on circumcision.

The coarseness of the jokes is remarkable when the butt of their laughter is the other community. It may be seen as part of the demonisation of the 'Other'. The Government House gardener, for instance, making fun of Muslims, relates that Lucknow Muslims are notorious for endlessly saying: 'After you, sir'. It so happened that two Muslim gentlemen arrived at a public toilet at the same time. One insisted, "After you, sir". The other insisted in the same way. They were so adamantly polite until, one, with an air of resignation, added: "You might as well go first, sir ... I have been." (Bapsi Sidhwa 100). The subtle irony and deft usage of language create humour that does not shroud but raucously highlights the fragile social relations.

It is more ribald and can be black humour when it comes to Muslim's jokes on Sikhs who are attacked because of their being impulsive. In *Cracking India*, it is said of Sikhs that they become mentally deficient at noon. Their luxuriant hair not only drains

the "grey matter" but it also warms their heads, and at noon, when the heat from the sun is at its highest, it addsles their brain. The malignant sting comes in the end: "Just the other day Mr. Singh milked his cow without a bucket. He did not even notice the puddle of milk on the ground ... It was exactly two seconds past twelve" (Bapsi Sidhwa.95). It has not only the force but also the sound of a slap in the face. The malice is direct as some Muslims make Hindus the butt of their laughter: "You Hindus eat so much beans and cauliflower" (Bapsi Sidhwa 97), farting right up to heaven. As time progresses, the facetious verbal humour turns into a physical assault. Sidhwa brilliantly contrasts earlier playful games with cruelty and brutality after religious differences begin separating the Hindus and Sikhs from the Muslims. Thus, Hari, a servant, is often teased by the Muslims who, intrigued by his wisp of *dhoti* (a piece of cloth worn by males) around his loins, tug at it, pretending that they will pull it off completely. The game, though boisterous and vulgar, is a good-humoured banter, and Hari seems to enjoy it. Later, it ceases to be so. Thus, it takes a vitriolic turn when some Muslims chase Hari, trying to pull off the cloth to denude him. The cloth around his loins does come off, and Hari is revealed in his pitiable nakedness, his genitals shrunk with fear. The relish in their voices is ghoulish as they run after him. Their practical jokes are coarse, indecent, and violent. This reminds one of the ill-treatment meted out to Iqbal Singh in *Tamas*. In both cases, a facetious and civil way of jesting is missing. Perhaps unable to stand the raillery and holocaust, Hari and Iqbal Singh become Himmat Ali and Iqbal Ahmed respectively, switching over to Islam as they have been starkly discriminated against based on their religion.

Caustic humour can be traced in *Train to Pakistan*. The aura of mistrust and suspicion, so rampant, brings about religiosity, as shown in *Train to Pakistan*. A Sikh youth in a Gurudwara harangues on the need to avenge the Sikh brethren massacred by killing a trainload of Muslims. He leads the prayer, reciting the names of the Sikh Gurus and asking for their blessings for the venture. Moved by his action, the people go down on their knees and rub their foreheads on the ground, loudly proclaiming: In the name of Nanak, By the hope that faith doth instil, By the Grace of God, We bear the world nothing but good will (Khushwant Singh 175).

The little ceremony ends with triumphant cries of "Sat Sri Akal," denoting how people, with all gullibility, are worked up when some appeal is made in the name of religion. The leader plays upon their religious sentiments by quoting Guru Gobind Singh, who urges Sikhs to befriend the Turk when all other communities are dead. He says like an "oracle" to remember their Guru's admonition that a Muslim succumbs only to physical assault, not to mere persuasion. Having heard the crowd's muffled approval, the boy orders them in the name of God to go to the bridge and slay the Muslims going to Pakistan by train. The crowds reciprocate the same temperament and are determined to prey upon the Muslims. The boy's slogan, "Victory to our God," indicates the abuse of religion. In this context, the remarks made by Terry Eagleton in *Holy Terror* on the ambivalence of religion are illuminating: "... religion is all about deeply ambivalent powers which both enrapture and annihilate" (2).

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When religious passions get hold of individuals, they run riot. They can be fully excited by propagating that their religious interests and their religion are at stake. The Sikhs, sullen and angry, recall the indignities meted out to their community: "What had they done to the Sikhs? Executed two of their Gurus, assassinated another and butchered his infant children; hundreds of thousands had been put to the sword for no other offence than refusing to accept Islam; the slaughter of the kine had desecrated their temples; the holy Grandh had been torn to bits" (Khushwant Singh 141-1442). Religious exclusivity leads initially to indifference and later to contempt, which becomes the breeding ground for communal violence and bigotry.

Allegory, Irony, and Pathos in Depicting Trauma

The vivid images extensively employed by various novelists bring out the ghastliness of the holocaust. Bapsi Sidhwa uses allegory to depict the trauma. The child narrator is affected by violence in Lahore. The scenes of violence and arson, and above all, the dissension in the ranks of Ayah's admirers, who had earlier rationalised about the impossibility of violence, have a frightening impact on the young Parsi girl, Lenny. Violence breeds violence. She directs her rage against her dolls. In frenzy, she acts frantically: "I pick out a bag, bloated celluloid doll. I turn it upside down and pull its legs apart" (Bapsi Sidhwa 138). Her destructive desire is not satisfied until she wrenches out the legs of the doll. This violent act by the child is an apt allegory of mindless hatred.

The novelists introduce structural irony that serves to sustain the duplicity of meaning. For instance, the pungent irony in *Tamas* is that the religious leaders, with a façade of peace, seek to foment communal riots. Thus, the revered Vanprasthiji, seeking to whip up communal sentiments, chants in his couplet: "Horrible have been the sins of the Muslims in the land. Even the sky has refused us its favor and the earth its bounty" (Bhisham Sahni.57). The messing up of religion and politics turns out to be very detrimental to Ice-candy-man, who like a chameleon, changes into a god man. There is a pungent touch of verbal irony in the Sikh youth's use of religion. He is ready to pounce upon the Muslims leaving for Pakistan in a bid to save their lives. He chants the holy verse: "By the grace of God / We bear the world nothing but good will" (Khushwant Singh 175). He solicits God's help in the holy mission of killing the Muslims. The implicit meaning intended by the speaker differs from that which he ostensibly asserts. There is dramatic irony in Ram Charan Gupta's statement, who, in a spasm of emotion, says: "Our blood will irrigate the dusty soil ... but we will build the temple ... This light will not be easily put out ... It will illuminate the whole of India with its flame" (Shashi Tharoor 124). The readers share with the novelist's knowledge of which Gupta is ignorant. The irony is that India is illuminated with the fury of murderous mobs as riots break out in many parts of India in the wake of Ram Sila Poojan. Postmodernism tends "to use and abuse, install but also subvert" (18) conventions through the use of either irony or parody, as Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) observes.

The degeneration of human beings into mere religious symbols is presented with all aplomb. As events roll ahead, gaining relentless momentum, the group of Ayah's admirers begins to dwindle. Ayah is no longer just "all-encompassing," as she

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has been, but has become "a token, a Hindu" (Bapsi Sidhwa 93). They lack individuality and fit into the slot that the communalist has cast. The polished sheen of life was shattered, and people were more conscious of a troubled present and a flummoxing future.

The novelists bring out the dehumanising impact of communal riots through pathos. A Hindu boy, for no other crime but being a Muslim, stabs a poor Muslim perfume seller to death. The plight of the tanner after slaying the pig, the old Sikh being uprooted, the 'sacrifice' of the Sikh women who jump into a well fearing rape, etc., in *Tamas*; the abduction of Ayah, who is used like a sewer by the rioters; the story of Ranna, who escapes death by a razor's edge, and the piteous state of Ice-candy-man in *Cracking India*; the sad tale of sweet Mohammad and Priscilla Hart in *Riot*; and the abduction of Maya and its consequent result on her family in *Lajja*—all evoke feelings of pity and sympathetic sorrow. The writers plunge their characters into depths of degradation and meanness from which they can be absolved only by way of divine compassion and salvation. Sometimes, bare facts present the holocaust. Taslima Nasreen gives long lists of murder, arson, rape, looting, and demolition of temples in her novels without dwelling upon every act, yet she achieves the effect by understatement.

Postmodern Frameworks: Dialogism and Micronarratives

According to Mikhail M. Bakhtin in his Dialogic Imagination (1981), multiple literary forms and meanings coexist in a given text, constantly interacting with each other and transforming its meaning. In other words, a novel comprises multiple and contending voices that become fully realised when they interact with each other and with the voice of the narrator. The novelist seems to be suspicious of monologism, a literary practice that subordinates all other voices in the novel to a single authoritative voice. He seems to exploit the polyphonic or many-sided voice potential. Like Bakhtin, he believes that dialogism employs this mixing of styles—a literary mode Bakhtin calls carnivalesque—that challenges authority and convention.

The existence of a variety of structures of language is profusely evident in *Tamas*, *Cracking India*, *Riot*, and *Lajja* in particular, to convey the ghastliness of the holocaust. The narratives of Laxman, Sarwar, Gurinder Singh, the journalist, and others in *Riot*, and the journalistic reports and the central narrative figure in *Lajja*, in their ways, try to portray the extent of the holocaust. "The anti-teleological—the existence of language generated by specific configurations of power, seeking precedence and the imposition of particular rules and hierarchies" (68), to cite Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, can be perceived as the undercurrent of the novels. The argument is that the era is marked by the demise of *grandes histoires* or "incredulity towards metanarratives" and the emergence of *petites histoires* or "micronarratives" (Jean-François Lyotard, xxiv). As a result, it becomes a process of problematization or subversion of realist (mainstream) aesthetic ideology. There is a palpable desire to subvert the elitism of modernist high culture. The representation of the ideology in the novel, *Riot*, has a binary structure made up of two contrasting halves. Lakshman and Sarwar elaborate on it on the one hand, and Ram Charan Gupta on the other. The first is leisurely and

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rationalistic, while the second moves with increasingly disjointed rapidity. The thesis of the structuralists is that narrative structures are founded upon such underlying paired opposites or dyads, so that contrasts such as these are the skeletal structure on which all narratives are fleshed out.

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