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## **The Brute in Personal and National Partition Narratives**

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**Abstract:**

*It is a much acknowledged fact that the Partition of India brought out the brute force in mankind and unleashed a reign of butchery, rape and plunder. What, one wonders, were the reasons that fed the intense hate wave and turned one community against another in a vicious game of rebuttals trading train for train, life for life and rape for rape?*

*It was as if a history of centuries of bloodshed, the invader's brutal aggression and the native's anguish, that had lain congealed in the collective unconscious of a continent had awakened and transformed into a raging conflagration that consumed all in its sway.*

*So who was this brute? Where was he and what was he? Did the brute live within a particular community? Or was it rather the case of an absence of all socio-political curbs that ensure law and order in a society and the opening up of windows of opportunity for social miscreants and opportunists who then installed themselves at the helm of small gangs and spearheaded carnage in different localities?*

*How does the brute - the magnified brute - manifest in the partition narrative? And how has the trauma percolated down the line of memory? This paper explores the location of the 'brute' in personal partition narratives and in partition literature through some short stories of Sa'adat Hasan Manto and the memoirs of my mother who was an eight year old at the time of partition in a haveli in Akalgadh, a village in the Gujranwala district.*

I shall commence this essay with a story of my mother's experience of the partition of India as she recalls and comprehends it. Her reflections upon Partition embroiled with her childhood are a combination of nostalgia, sights of post partition trauma, tragedies within the family and tales picked up from older family members in the growing up years. Partition for her meant the shutting of doors upon the fun-filled days of a utopian childhood and the commencement of a world that was uncertain, harsh, nomadic and smattered with harsh realities that pointed towards a lack. The collective memory, the sense of loss was like a shared inheritance that continued to haunt through glorified memories of a heroic past that had suddenly turned monstrous, brutal and disenchanting. Partition for her who was just eight then, scattered the Kwatra family like so much chaff to the wind. Carried by the winds of chance the Kwatras, which fled Pakistan are settled today in India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Canada and the USA. In contemporary parlance they would fall under neat categories and be labelled as Indian, NRI, Diaspora, Subaltern, Pakistani and what not. Guru Nanak's blessings to the good people of the good village come to mind: 'ujjad jaao', and one wonders if it is an occasion to celebrate the family's movements across the continent and their consequent settlements, unwittingly they have submitted themselves to the occasion of population analysis and culture studies!

At the outset let me acknowledge that the scope of the Partition narrative which straddles the twin realms of fiction and fact is too vast and complex for a short essay like this to address comprehensively. I shall therefore shrink and limit my analysis to a slice of narrative culled from the memoirs of Bibi Kulwant Kaur Kwatra, my 75 year old mother who was then a mere eight year old clinging to her mother's chunni (dupatta) or holding hands with her five and three year old brothers as she crossed the border in relative safety with her illustrious family. The familial account of personal history is followed by a brief examination of 'Open It,' 'Cold Meat' and 'Toba Tek Singh,' three stories by Saadat Hasan Manto who grew up in Amritsar, wrote in Bombay and later turned to alcohol after he moved to Pakistan in 1948 - Manto's ambivalence towards partition and his life-story in itself is symbolic of the post Partition dilemma that divided and traumatised so many. His stories to my mind are among the finest of reflections on Partition, written as they are from a premise that was unbiased, honest and humanistic and transcends the politics of communal binaries. Lastly the essay wraps up with a brief discussion on the nature and location of the brute-force that gripped an entire nation and choreographed the shameful carnage following the partition of India (and Pakistan) in what was supposed to be its glorious hour of freedom.

Returning to my mother's memoirs we find ourselves in an expansive, grand old mansion ( haveli, ) in a village called Akalgadh in Gujranwala district in West Punjab. Known as Kulwant Kaur Kawatra nee Rani, she was the eldest child of Sardar Santokh Singh Kwatra, son of Sardar Dr Jaimal Singh Kwatra. Rani had two younger brothers and an infant sister back then, the rest of them arrived later in partitioned India.

My mother's memoirs weave through pre and post partition worlds and fashion an interesting fabric of adventure, survival and hearsay. I have reproduced a part of it in the order that it was divulged to me. Details about the family's elite life have been retained as they provide valuable data on Punjabi culture and bring home the enormity of the post partition phantom of loss that has continued to haunt mother and her siblings who went through partition as children but now are aged and preparing, with their sack of memories, for an innings in another world. Rani's story in her own words :

'To part is painful. To part forever against one's will even more. Especially when it involves leaving not only one's loved ones but also one's home, ones village, the people one played with, grew up with, the gardens, the fields, the warmth, the security...the swings in the courtyard, in the bagichi, the smell of the room one slept in – all of it that defined one and was a blueprint of one's own soul. Akalgadh, the Kwatra Haveli, which gave meaning to my existence, was an extension of my spiritual core. The glow of that lamp, that joy, lingers in memory and has continued to mould my existence to this very day.

I was eight when it happened and the implications of it did not register until much later when I watched my father hunt and scourge refugee camps, streets, cities in search of lost family members. Biji was too dazed taking care of us all, cooking, cleaning, serving my two widowed Chachis (aunts) who would weep and weep and demand all sorts of service – 'Get me a coca cola.' 'Massage my feet! hai I'm in such pain!' The younger Chachi would fill my father's ears against Biji (my mother) and he in turn would get angry with her who had nowhere to turn to...her parents were in Jammu and here was she delivering one baby after another and so many mouths to cook and feed. It was a large Sikh family – the same family into which the famous Amrita Pritam was married – and so many had been lost, abducted, burnt, killed. I was a child then secure in my parents' protection and busy with school.

My memories as a kid still play hide and seek and run across the hundred rooms and the huge basements that were so cool. A little before we left Akalgadh, I remember the basements were being stocked – now I realise that it was being done because the family did not intend to migrate, we were fortifying ourselves so we would bide our time and live it out till the partition fever abated and life resumed its normal course. We never intended to leave. Akalgadh had been home for us for many generations. We were too well established. We were safe here. Our land extended to include many a village. Who could ever think of leaving a palace and trudging the roads? It was decided that a small part of the family hibernate across the border only till such time as the violence abated and things returned to normalcy.

You know, my grandfather (Taayaji) used to ride a Buggi (horse carriage), drawn by six horses! He was a doctor and the only son of my great grandfather – we called him Bapuji. He was very devout and saintly, and had held a very high office in the British army. [As reward of great grandfather's services to the British army a lot of land had come into the family - in and around Baluchistan and Gujranwala district. Later he had put a stop to further land grants as he had only one son, what would he do with so much?] Bapuji had a great gift for music and could play many musical instruments. When it was time for him to go, he was able to sense it....I was a small girl then but I remember the grand celebrations (the Waddaa) performed on his death. He was a little over ninety. A large number of people had congregated and a lot of khushboo (fragrance) had arisen on his passing away. The Guru's teachings, naam japna, reading of the Guru Granth Saheb and its seva was a regular family practice....my father and his brothers had rote-learned all the five paaths (scriptures) walking up and down on the banks of Chenab river . They had all been to school in Bannu where they learnt to speak and write Pashto and Urdu. There they also learnt wrestling from the Pathans!

Guru ka Langar (open kitchen) at the haveli was a common feature; any stranger passing by or anyone in need of a meal was welcome to our kitchen – this was implemented so religiously that the villagers referred to our home as 'laangariyan da ghar.'

Then there was Bebe – daughter of the keeper of the village graveyard, the Shamshaanghat – she had come to live on the second floor after her father passed away. Bebe was quite old and bent backed....later when things changed in the city, she would join us on the terrace to watch the burning fires that could be seen blazing in and around the city.

Sometimes I heard the elders argue about going away.

Going where? I wondered. Papaji, my father was arguing with grandpa who was insisting that he leave with the children atleast till it was safe to return again.

And so in the wee hours of one morning we left, for I have no memory of leaving Akalgadh except that along the way the train had stopped somewhere and Papaji hid my Chacha who was studying in a college in Lahore, and my two younger brothers under the seat among the luggage. They dragged Papaji to the platform to kill him, my mother followed, running after them, pleading. I remember her on the platform on her knees with folded hands begging them for Papaji's life – they wouldn't relent so she touched their feet and was pleading to let him go ...then she removed all the gold she was wearing and they let go of him and we reached some refugee camp and then proceeded to Dehradun to Mamaji's house in the army camp...Mamaji was a Lieutenant in the British army then, I remember there were about 30 of us family members who had gathered in his house temporarily for a month or two. Later Papaji got a job as inspector of buildings and construction sites and we moved from city to city, living in rented houses for many years. There was violence all around us.

News of the family was not good. My father had three brothers and two sisters who were married. Of the three brothers two brothers had stayed back in the Akalgadh Haveli with my grandpa. It was because of my chachi the doctor chacha's wife, who refused to leave. Her parents were in Sialkot and she was adamant she would not leave until they did. Later after she was widowed she was so full of remorse that she took to a life of sanyas and lived her entire life at the ashram of our family guru who was based in Lkhnow.

On the fateful morning of the 16th of August, doctor Chacha had just returned from the Thaanedaar's after bandaging and dressing the thaanedaar's wounded son's. He had just taken a bath and just finished telling the morning scriptures of the Japji Saheb when in walked the thaanedaar with a rifle. Seeing him with gun in hand he asked, why friend have you come to kill me? The thaanedaar said yes I have. Not believing him, Doctor Chacha laughed and said, 'Ok then shoot!' The Thaanedaar pumped in three bullets into Chacha's chest. A younger Chacha and Tayaji were shot dead while they were at the breakfast table by another muslim friend of the thaanedaar's who had accompanied him that morning.

It was obviously a well planned move for the two of them had ensured on some pretext that the 2 Chachis were out of the Haveli when they arrived to shoot Grandpa and the Chachas. It is the servants that informed them later when they were held hostage on the second floor of the Thaanedaar's haveli. Both the Chachis were exceedingly beautiful and of regal bearing. The Thaanedaar and his friend were obviously desperate to marry them. Unfortunately for those rogues and fortunately for us both the Chachis were pregnant, so the Thaanedaar and his friend had no option but to wait....meanwhile they tried their best to coerce them into a nikah.

Fed up with soft measures and their obstinate refusals to give in, at long last the Thaanedaar threatened to bury them alive. The Chachis were undeterred, so one morning they were sent with two gravediggers to the graveyard. Two graves were dug. The women embraced bid each other goodbye and entered the respective pits. At that moment the grave diggers lost their nerve and with folded hands requested those two beautiful young pregnant women to run for their lives. The story of these chaste women's escape and their journey to the border is fraught with much danger and adventure, as the thaanedaar's men on horseback chased and hunted them all the way to the border. It is only God's grace that they reached with both life and honour intact.

The Chachis delivered their babies in free India – one was stillborn and the other died within fifteen days of birth. My Chachi was elated that her baby had died, she felt good the infant had joined his father who was alone up there!' What would he have done in such a world. ....both the women were in such trauma that they'd weep all day, and often faint. My father was shocked at this gross betrayal of the Thaanedaar. The sudden dissolution of a rock-solid family, deaths of his father, elder brothers, widows in the family, confiscation of the family property and being literally on the roads – all this was too much to take. Faced suddenly with the weight of so much tragedy and responsibility he simply went berserk....my mother, Biji, did her best to cope with all that grief. There were no servants but still I remember at night before we went to bed, our feet were washed in a bowl of warm water by my mother, and sometimes by Papaji. Those years of trauma and uncertainty thank god are over. Somehow the years put a distance and gradually the pain numbed.

This is just one story among other family stories of violence, self immolation, abandoned or lost children and escape. My father had two sisters, while one of them came across with us, the other Bhuaa's [fraternal aunt] family doused itself with kerosene and chose to die by fire – however my cousin who was a baby then, slipped out of the group and crawled away from the raging fire. Luckily he was found by some blessed angel who ensured that he reached India safe and sound. He has a thriving business today and has done well for himself!' says my mother. There is such joy and pride on her face when she says it.

Rani's partition narrative sketches/portrays a hazy utopian cameo of pre-partition days, trudges along to post partition trauma and skims through news of new establishments that brought their own share of healing and a moving on and away. Her vision of the family is embedded in patriarchy; her ideas of aristocracy and punjabi nobility are closely fused with the presence of the Sikh Gurus, the Guru's teachings and ideology. The women of the family are portrayed as ideal wives and mothers - devoted, chaste and courageous...typical sardarnis they are beautiful, and show exceptional courage in the face of hardships and death – a feature that is common to scores of sikh/punjabi women that people the partition narrative. Here we find women - Punjabi women - both real and fictional, who exist within a patriarchal setup and yet are individuals in their own right – seducing, asserting and when required, quick to take charge of a situation and deal with courage and an unhindered sense of fierceness like lionesses.

The sardarni Kulwant Kaur in Saadat Hasan Manto's story, Cold Flesh is a crude example, but then she hails from a less privileged social category. Furiously passionate, she is infuriated by her husband's confession to infidelity, and without listening to the whole story she hastens to slit his throat with the same dagger that he has used to kill scores of helpless women. As Ishar Singh coughs blood he resigns himself to death for he has sinned – with the same dagger he killed six women and the seventh he abducted with an intention to rape not realising that she was dead. In an ironic twist of events poetic justice prevails - the brute in Ishar Singh that was driven by lust and greed to plunder and rape innocent women is rendered impotent; bleeding at the throat he confesses his guilt before his wife but its too late; fear, shame, guilt consume him; in succumbing to the brute he had already killed his soul and now in the conjugal embrace he too becomes meat – cold meat. A major part of Manto's genius lies in the way he situates the protagonist and projects violence (physical, mental, emotional) in his short stories. In Cold Flesh it is not the rape but the rapist's spiritual anguish and trauma that are put under the spotlight. The story unravels in a frustrating love scene between husband and wife, the dark intrigue behind the husband's sudden impotence.

Manto's stories capture that moment of partition violence/crisis which also becomes its own critique as it propels further, the story; on the other hand the memoirs of my mother who was then an eight year old kid, are focused more on the sweet memories of childhood, the general prosperity and a child's simplistic perceptions of the world around her – the awareness of violence comes to her more from retold family narratives than from a direct experience of it. So in Kulwant Kawatra's memoirs, the brute aspect of partition violence is revealed as it manifests in the tragic impact – the emotional and financial crisis and the miserable condition of the family. The brute as Manto depicts it is at the site of brutal action – more immediate and harrowing and therefore a closely realistic recreation of the brutal fall of human from his own humanity.

In yet another story, Toba Tek Singh, the futility of the government's decision to recover abandoned Hindu and Muslim subjects from both sides of the border is lampooned. Manto comments upon the pointlessness of operation Recovery but not through stories about the recovery of abducted women and lost children as was commonly being done. Once again through a brilliant strategy of subversion he situates the Recovery in the margins of society - in an asylum in Pakistan mad men are being relocated to Hindustani and Pakistani asylums. As the dynamics of Recovery unfolds the half-informed, half-witted cell mates resist the change, and mourn – the situation is ludicrous and the stage is set for a brilliant play of histrionics darkly comic, absurd and at the same time, tellingly tragic. Toba Tek Singh's defiance against being taken across the border translates in his positioning himself on a strip of land that belongs to neither country.

When they tried to move him forcibly to the other side, he stood on his swollen legs at a spot in the middle, in a posture that seemed to suggest that no power on earth could move him from there. Because he was a harmless fellow, they did not use force anymore. He was allowed to stand right there, while the exchange proceedings continued.

Just before sunrise, a sky rending cry emerged from the gullet of Bishen Singh, who till then had stood still and unmoving. ....the man that had stood on his legs day and night for fifteen years, was lying on his face. Over there behind the barbed wires was Hindustan. Over here, behind identical wires lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of land that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh. (70, Translating Partition)

The simple conviction and wisdom that underlie his madness provide an apt metaphor to the point Manto intends to make through the story. Who it is that is insane?

Another partition theme that glaringly stares one in the face is that of betrayal. Betrayal of doctor-Chacha's friendship and trust in the Thaanedaar back home in Akaalgadh, and in Manto's story, Open It. The story showcases an even darker aspect of betrayal while it questions at the same time the myth of communal loyalties. (an aspect also dealt with in Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan through Malli's the dacoit's character). An injured father finds himself in a refugee camp without his daughter Sakina. Not finding her after relentlessly searching for her days on end, he turns to a group of young men with a jeep who go scouting around rescuing lost family members of the refugee. The young men promise to find the beautiful Sakina and unite her with the father but when they do find her they succumb to temptation. They gangrape her and abandon her half dead by the railway tracks thus betraying the father's faith that the young men would find Sakina and bring her to him safe and sound. Once again in a masterly stroke of the pen Manto has not only written a story of 'partition' violence but also subverted commonly held presumptions of partition narrative regarding the identity of the abusive brute. By transforming the rescuer into the rapist in Open It Manto takes the theme of partition violence and the brute to yet another level. Here is a master story writer who spoke, as Mathew Arnold says, of issues that were contemporary but at the same time through the depth of his vision he spoke of them as issues of humanity addressed to all human kind.

Similarly in the escape narrative of the pregnant Chaachis, while the abusive thaanedaar, brute that he was, belonged to the other community; so did many old servants of the haveli, the grave digger whose daughter came to live with us, and so also the peasants who fed, sheltered and hid the Chachis when they were being followed by the Thaanedaar's men; they helped them at the risk of great peril to their own lives. Many an angel-hearted muslim peasant and his family are to be thanked for they ensured that in a landmine of grasping and butchering brutes the march of my grand Chachis towards the border was accomplished. So then where was the brute? Who was the brute here? Did it serve to associate him with symbols of the other such as specific attire, colour, gender, language, god or faith? Was the brute located in the other?

The brute was often an opportunistic goonda, the criminal dacoit Malli of a Train to Pakistan released from prison and plunging upon a mass of homeless sheep like a wolf in disguise. So also the Thaanedaar of Akalgadh – another Malli – who murdered Kulwant Kawatra's maternal ancestors and took possession of the haveli. He had obviously lusted for Doctor-Chachi and Partition with its anti-Hindu/Sikh rage had brought him the perfect opportunity, the camouflage for wish fulfilment. That he failed to enjoy the spoils and the prize - the Chachis slipped away - is another matter of the ironic and skewed sway of God's justice. There is however a sizeable body of partition literature that locates the blame, the brute, in the other.

A certain kind of writing (such as the novels of Guru Dutt) trivializes the Partition experience by looking for scapegoats and reproducing clichés about the other community. The heroes and villains so familiar in the dominant discourse dealing with High Politics, are reproduced here ad nauseam. This tendency to attribute blame to certain leaders or a community is often an attempt to achieve a cessation of guilt. Such escapist writing may be deemed to be the worst by-product of the collective imagination's attempt to negotiate the Partition trauma....A banal literature can never enable a genuine coming to terms with the past. (XXV, Ravikant and Saint, Translating Partition)

This brings us to the premise that society and social norms have a vital role to play in regulating and channelizing human behaviour into acceptable productive categories. Social norms and laws act as regulating agencies that bridle the brute within the heart of mankind and ensure that the masses remain within the framework of acceptable moral and civic codes of conduct.

Social norms in other words are traffic rules that have evolved over the ages as human civilizations developed and moved away from the jungle and the brute to forge improved and more harmonious ways of existence based on higher codes of refinement and brotherhood. The idea of Honour – family honour – prestige, personal and public image/masks; the fear of ostracization as against the desire for social acknowledgement and acceptance – all such considerations keep us from giving unbridled vent to fantasies which are violent, lusty and which go against the grain of a harmonious just society.

Society and tradition as we know it is the much evolved end-product of a long drawn process of human refinement and behavioural patterns forged by the human need for civilized, peaceful and progressive strategies of survival. The basis of an evolved civic society however is abstract and therefore fragile, for its success depends on the cohesive and coordinated functioning of a collective people bound by tangible systems of law and order that function through agencies of systematized punishment and fear....

The basis of societal sanity lies in the health of its power centre, the efficacy of the law and order systems and the collective unconscious and conscious of its people which is fertilised by the history/past and the present respectively. What happens when an age old social structure is suddenly shattered and the ties that bind people into civic discipline are suddenly loosened? A holocaust is unleashed and a brute is born in every nook every corner and a pogrom happens.

The Partition which saw a complete collapse of systems of government and the machinery of law and order spiralled into a typhoon of mass migrations which proved combustive and led to the eruption of violence arson rape and killings enmass over an extended period of fierce riots. Another feature that fed into the horror was the fact that people of India had just stepped into freedom – ignited and intensely charged as people were with the freedom fight, with passions flying high and insecurity a galore, it took little for them to divert the emotional excess the same instincts for war in a direction that led them towards hell...the irony of independence which instead of bringing a rebirth brought us death.

The Partition happened in the shadow of Indian Independence – a glorious climax was achieved after an immense heroic struggle, ages of self-denial, sacrifice, and noble organised aggression. The pendulum of human achievements which had swung to the heroic extreme was now ready to swing back and swing it did to the demonic hells in the wake of the partition of india into india and Pakistan. The totally antithetical dynamics of the Partition wave bathed the Indian subcontinent in rivers of blood. The very people who had fought shoulder to shoulder for the liberation of the country today were turned against each other in a macabre dance of death. These were men who had conquered fear and learnt to uninhibitedly challenge/question authority. The very traits that had lifted them to heights of human bravado and nobility, today were responsible for the relentless slide into hellish brutality. Religion, mother tongue, land and property had been triggers to the pogrom but after a point when lust took over and violence turned blind even religion ceased to matter. Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan and Saadat Hasan Manto's story, 'Open It' are examples... the unbridled chaos and the falling apart of all social code provided a feisty opportunity for brute elements on both sides, to capitalise on baser instincts through violence, rape, plunder and all sorts of atrocities which were perpetrated ironically, in the name of religion and country.

An innumerable amount of factual and fictional narratives around the partition provide us with proof of the fact that the 'brute' the 'bully' has no face, no name, no religion. Where is the brute in the story 'Open it'? The muslim girl is gang raped by muslim boys of her own faith –boys who had set out as a search party, upon the father's request – they who picked her off the road as faith-brothers and protectors turned monstrous rapists. The ironic reversal of accepted norms is a norm of Manto's writing and with it he finds himself a place in great literature that speaks of mankind and humanity.

The location of the brute is determined not by communal differences but by the decisions we all take and by the frameworks from which we confront and negotiate situations in life. But this framework is a tricky space for it comprises of both the conscious and the unconsciousness collective of memory, emotion and history.

As Muneeza Sahmsie, a journalist from Pakistan says,

One of the problems is that Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were both perpetrators and the victims. Therefore, unlike the Holocaust victims, their moral stand, as individual communities, has been eroded. This has led to a collective guilt, which South Asians find difficult to confront. (Dawn, August 14, 2001- quoted by Jaya Bhattacharji Rose in The Hindu, August 11, 2011.)

Returning full circle to the personal history I'd like to point out that the perception that emerge's from my mother's narrative is the perception of the Kwatra family which all through is the telling of a partitioned India not about a free India. Also I would like to add that somewhere down the line of repeatedly listening to the family's partition narrative, the experience and the trauma has melded into my own consciousness and become mine. My mother's narrative is my narrative – added to this the trauma of a divorce and an uprooting from a home that [I thought] was my own, have further scarred my soul; and so in a strange way the two are one. In writing

of my mother's pain or responding to the critique of unstinted brutality in Manto's stories, I write of my own pain and the partition goes on.

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