

Violence and the Floating Self: A Critical Study of *A Time of Madness: A Memoir of Partition*

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Na main arabinalahori
Na main Hindi shehar Nagaori
Na hindunaturkpashauri
Na main rahndavich Nadaun
Maethonhorna koi siyaana
Bulleyakijaana main kaun
Bulleya!oohkhaddahaikaun
Bulleyakijana main kaun (Shah sufipoetry. wordpress.com)
(Not an Arab, nor Lahori
Neither Hindi, nor cosmopolitan
Hindu, Turkish, nor Peshawari
Nor do I live in Nadaun
I am the wisest of them all
Bulleya! To me, I am unknown
Bulleya! Do I stand alone?
Bulleya! To me, I am unknown)

When Bulle Shah wrote this poem, the words came out with an understanding that to completely know oneself is an impossible task. This understanding wherein he goes onto to describe the various parameters that human beings usually use or depend upon, to define themselves, are nothing but broken pieces of self which can only define a part and not the whole. The self, he realised, breaks into fragments because of the violence that is wreaked upon, by the society and sometimes the self; thereby making it impossible to hold on to the totality of the self. However, these fragments, which are all complex use simple rhetoric to unfold them. How violence leads to this fragmentation and how these fragments entangle with each other will be looked at in the paper.

Benedict Anderson calls the nation as an imagined community wherein, despite the members not knowing all the members of the community, they all have an idea of how the members are to be (3). This idea becomes problematic when all of a sudden a line is traced on a piece of paper dividing the community into two with the members given a different parameter as to how the new members of the

two pieces are to be. People who had been up until now living together as one unit, assuming commonalities between each other are suddenly given different identities and are ordered to assume differences instead between each other. How this simple tracing of a line on a piece of paper created violence, which resulted in the suffering of millions, is what Salman Rashid writes about in his memoir, *A Time of Madness: A Memoir of Partition*.

He begins the memoir by writing that he was fifty-six years old when he first headed home. Though born in a family, which migrated, to Pakistan during the Partition, yet he always identified himself as an Indian. For him, the nation is the land, where his ancestors chose to live and were not forced to live because of the circumstances. It is a place both geographically and metaphorically located in the memories of pain and loss as suffered by his family. He is unable to adhere to the identity as given forth by the State he was born in, the one where he is expected to hate the enemy, which he has grown to locate, to identify as his home, and not the enemy. It becomes problematic for him when his idea of his identity gets questioned and rejected, thereby losing it in the subjectivity of others. The 'thrownness' -in Heideggerian sense of the word- of Rashid's being, lost its meaning the moment his feet touched the land in India. All the conditioning regarding his self and being, which gave meaning to his identity, became conflicted when he begins to identify with the 'enemy'. This struggle of identifying himself through emotional and historic space is a struggle not just experienced by him but by million other Rashids whose family were forced to leave their homes and through it themselves behind. When talking about the history of the geographical space of Pakistan, he says, "If I am anything, I, a child of MahaSapta Sindhu, am the truest Hindu" and he explains that it wasn't until the middle ages that 'Hindu' came to be associated with the religion(Rashid, 5). For him, it still means the area of Sindhu River. Rashid in his quest for finding an identity for himself comes across as an example of the Heideggerian *Dasian*. His potentiality -for being- comes from his engagement of the past that exists as not merely as what was but also in the possibility of having been, with his present (Heidegger 63). His present, which is defined as a Pakistani, also sets course for his future as a being who understands the pain and struggle to exist for those who witnessed the trauma of Partition. This can only happen since his present self, interacts continuously with his past and merely his lived past, but the possibilities of what has been of the collective past of his ancestors too. It thus becomes important to understand what it means for him to be an Indian, living outside of India in Pakistan. People always associate themselves from the place they call home, and therefore identifying himself as an Indian is his attempt, at claiming the legacy of his ancestors through the land they called home. Rashid's father can be seen as an entry point to understand the violence behind the loss of home, whose wounds never healed. While describing his father, the author writes that his father never built a single house in his entire life. To lose a house wherein one sees a thousand dreams and hopes to achieve those aspirations that he had since childhood, broke the carefree, boisterous man to such an extent that he never again dared to build another house in fear of losing more. When asked about it he would always say that fools build houses and wise live in them.

The father, throughout the memoir exists not as one coherent self but as somebody caught up between the two selves- pre partition and post partition. The Chicago School of Symbolic Interactionism argued that the identity is a result of the nominal interaction of the self with the society at large (Cote and Levine, 50). They further argue that through the interaction with the society human beings attach meaning to these interactions and this is later gives meaning to their own identity i.e human beings infer their own identity through their interaction with the outside world and thereby giving meaning (symbols) to these interactions. When seen through this lens, the identity of the father becomes flawed because of Partition and its resulting trauma. Due to the Partition, people like Rashid's father, lost

meaning they attached to various interactions with society at large –which we may call the various parameters they used to define their identity such as geographical location, homeland, etc- thereby losing the grip over their identity. The man who lost everything and began anew had to take up the role of the omerta of the house, one who never laughed or cried, one who always remained stoic. This happened with not just the father but also the uncle of the author. Theirs is a family, which never talked about what happened during that fateful summer and to what extent did they lose. This attempt to bury the memory was the only way the family could survive and move on in a land that never was really theirs. This silence that was maintained by them was not only for the younger generation of the family, to spare the children of the horrors seen by the elders, but at the same time it was also a way to spare themselves of re-living those horrors. It was only when Rashid's aunt, Zubeda was murdered by her own servant that his uncle, fondly called Chan spoke about the past “we lost two sisters in Jalandhar during the partition riots, and she who made it through virtually from under the swords of rioters got to Pakistan only to be murdered in her own home by her servant” (45). The family lost the certainty of their lives, their selves, when they first migrated to Pakistan and then again when Zubeda was murdered. Their selves like broken pieces of mirror, showed only fragments of what was. The assurance that the land they own, the house they own is what defines people and that these certainties will continue to provide meaning in their lives; was taken away by the ‘Other’, the State which until the Partition, did not hold much meaning in their lives. After the sacrifice of the blood of their loved ones, their own flesh and blood, those, who were left behind were again given hope by time, that somehow things could again get better, their lives could move on. However, just like the last time, these hopes were once again dashed, forcing Chan to break his silence over the tragedy. Thus begins the cycle of trying to find the anchor to root oneself, all over again.

Through the journey that he takes, Rashid tries to bring to life his grandfather and his family home, who until now existed only through a sepia photograph. The unified self that he always identified his grandfather with slowly starts to crumple as the journey moves on. Rashid discovers that how the atmosphere of hatred had affected his grandfather who was always known as a just man. He is unable to comprehend at first how his grandfather who is known to everybody as a man who will take the utmost care of his patients, irrespective of their religion, would ask his friend to not wake him up from his afternoon sleep to tend to a Sikh man or how a man who abhorred the taste of cow meat decides to sacrifice a cow publically for Eid. Only as his journey advances and he hears stories from people who witnessed the carnage, does he come to his own realisation as to how the normative understanding of identity and its associations change during time of crisis. Identity has always been defined in contrast to the other, which makes it uncertain and unstable. Just as soon one idea of a certain aspect of identity is thought to be true, crisis arises and changes the understanding just the same. This is the reason that while neighbours were killing neighbours during the Partition riots, there were people who risked their own lives for the sake of the others and perpetrators themselves stood silent and refused to harm anyone simply because the victims pleaded for mercy.

Martin Heidegger in his work, *Being and Time* talks about the experiences of human self that are unique to the them. This experiential being whom he calls, *Dasein* is crucial to understand the concept of self. *Dasein*, the ontological being is always pre-subjective. It exists before the ‘inauthentic’ self that we encounter in our lives daily (41). For him, our endeavour should be to transcend from the ‘inauthentic’ self -which is in simpler terms existing without realising about the existence of a nobler self, the real self- to the ‘authentic’ self (53). However, the temporality of *Dasein* that Heidegger insists upon, lost in case of various characters of the memoir. The unity between the past, present and the future on which rests the harmonious existence of the temporality is broken the moment, the past,

or the 'existence' of various characters of the memoir clashes with the present, the 'thrownness', thereby resulting in the incoherent encounter with each other.

Through the lives of various people in the memoir, one sees a struggle between the multiple selves of their lives, which though arose during times of crisis, now constantly entangle and detangle with each other. The Father, who though maintains a stoic personality, has never be seen shedding tears, even when his family members were butchered; but tears his eyes remembering how his father used to eat boiled potatoes.

From the moment human beings develop some understanding of the self, do they struggle to transcend the 'I'ness of the I, however this is made impossible because this stability is yearned for in a specific time-space curvature, which is unfortunately not in one's control. Thus, Partition trauma changed the understanding of self, because the factors affecting it were not in the control of the victims. What they did have in their control was their silence, which spoke volumes.

A Time of Madness: A Memoir of Partition is not only a memoir of broken selves, but also a metaphorical journey that takes place alongside the physical journey of the author. This is a journey to discover the past and through that discovery, re-discovering, re-defining his own self and trying to make some semblance of his existence. From the moment Rashid started his journey from the Indian High Commission in Pakistan, to finally going and seeing the village of his ancestors, seeing his house, where he could have been born and lived, he is faced with not only the past but alongside the past an understanding of the present as well. When he was told by the commissioner at the embassy to take the application for a visa back, he is as displaced as his ancestors were. His identity being defined as somebody, whom he does not relate to and being denied a chance to go and be at one with his homeland, he relives the struggle of his father at the time of Partition. This journey not only unites Rashid with his past but also affects his understanding of his own self. Therefore, when he meets the son of the man who led the mob which killed his grandfather and other relatives, he can be nothing but sympathetic to the misery of the son. The idea of revenge or anger does not even arise in his mind because he realised just as he was carrying the albatross of the mystery of his family history, Mohinder Singh, was carrying another albatross around his neck. At the end of his journey, he becomes at one with the collective pain and suffering and realises the only way to move forward and find the stability that he had been looking for is to forgive. Because, he finds the 'I'ness of his I in the 'We' of the partition trauma, was he able to cross the metaphorical 'Iron Curtain' of anger, revenge and stand besides other victims.

At the end, one can only hope the way Rashid does, to find the anchor or the certainty of being in the collective and not in the self. It is only through the realisation of the suffering and the pain felt by the others that one can absolve him/herself of the pain and find happiness. Ultimately, when Bulle Shah realised that the being is much more complex and layered that the shallow masks of caste and creed did he truly find himself and therefore 'Maethnsayanahorkon?' (Who is wiser than I?).

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