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Memory, Violence and the Body in *Ice-Candy-Man* and *Lajja*

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Abstract: The impact of violence upon the psyche of the victim has always had a traumatic affect upon their memory which destabilizes their sense of history and their place in the larger dynamics of national and international politics. Such impact adversely affects their outlook on life and the cognitive absorption of future incidents creating an uncertainty about their position as individuals and communities. While entire communities suffer as victims during periods of violence and trauma, it is the women and the children who are worse victims for they are perceived as ‘soft targets’ during ethnic and communal clashes. Women, more than often, are made targets for the satiation of the lustful ego of males who carry out atrocities during such times. Such unfortunate events have a dual affect so far the memories of the violated and the violators are concerned. One of the most traumatic events of displacement, violence and trauma has been the partition of the Indian nation in 1947 into the states of India and Pakistan. With its after-burns still being felt and finding presence in political, social, economic and strategic domains, partition of India has found its way into literature with various authors, poets, dramatists and film-makers in different languages presenting and re-presenting it from different positions. The turmoil of the event left millions traumatized with each having his/her story to tell, amounting finally into an unending epic of pain and horror. This paper intends to analyze Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man* with the objective of finding out how memories are attempted at being ‘tailored’ and created during periods of violence and trauma by relating violence and memory to the body in acts of subjugation and coercion. Along with *Ice-Candy-Man*, this paper also intends an analysis of Taslima Nasrin’s *Lajja (Shame)* to focus on the complex relationship between violence, memory and the body in “the insanity of violence in our time” originating from fundamentalism and inhumanity. A major thrust of the paper will be on an understanding of how the female body in



particular is treated as a site of conflict and contest for the satiation of lust and establishment of inhuman authority.

Keywords: Female body, fundamentalism, memory, partition, violence.

Roland Barthes in *On the Subject of Violence* (1985) rightly points out that in order to discuss violence “one must choose one’s key”. Body, in this sense, can rightly serve as the key since the bodily or the physical reception of violence is an aspect that is integral to the dynamics of domination, control and violence. ‘Memory’, ‘Body’ and ‘Violence’ are all critical terms in themselves and given their different capacities for interpellations, any discussion that seeks to incorporate all the three will indeed be a complex task. The importance of the body in cultural and feminist theorizations is very high where it serves to suture disparate critical currents. David Hansen-Miller, in his review of *Violence and the Body: Race, Gender, and the State*, maintains:

The body enters where discrete analyses of specific interpellations (e.g. ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality) falter in the face of complex intersectionality. Burdened as it is by multiple inscriptions, the body grounds confrontations between the material and symbolic in specific arrangements of power and knowledge. (2007, 157)

Hansen-Miller also opines that like the body, ‘violence’ is also a complicated term since it also “serves to complicate the boundary between the material and the symbolic”. Such remarks, from Roland Barthes to Hansen-Miller and Aldama, provide a distinct space to the body to be used as a critical coupling for a better critical insight into violence. The body can be considered as a site for inscription of violence and an exploratory space where such interaction can be studied. It should also be understood that violence does not merely turn the body into a subject and inscriptional site but also animates it through repression; and it stands true for both the male and the female bodies.

The relationship between body and memory is perhaps best contained in the hypothetical concept of ‘body memory’ which holds that the body itself is capable of holding strong memories as opposed only to the brain. The concept dwells on the impact of repressed memories such as that of incest or rape in which the body retains the pain and regenerates it through sensations. Of course, there are critics like the psychologist Susan E. Smith who refute the idea of body memory as a case of “scientific illiteracy”



and “gullibility” (1993). Yet one cannot deny the importance of body and memory and their relationship to violence, especially in instances of repression and trauma. Doug Henry writes how the body and even bodily illness “become useful tools with which survivors of conflict apprehend and express both trauma and their marginality”. According to him, the body is thus transformed into a “social object, a locus for contested control and a target to be edited and narrated by others” (2006, 380). This aspect is also supported by Maria Olujić in her essay ‘Embodiment of Terror: Gendered Violence in Peacetime and Wartime in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina’ (1999). Medical and clinical studies on violence also do not exclude the body from the overall perimeter of analysis. Hence, both the body and the mind go through a scarring process in their encounter with violence which, in due time, are bound to be linked to memory.

This paper is an attempt at studying how the body serves as a carrier for the marks of violence and how its implications can be found in the memory of the victims as well as upon the perpetrators of violence as reflected in Bapsi Sidwa’s *Ice Candy Man* (1988) and Taslima Nasrin’s *Lajja* (1994). Both *Ice Candy Man* and *Lajja* have violence and its impact on the body and the mind of the characters as an important theme though the spatio-temporal groundings of the novels are different. The paper will also focus on how attempts at ‘tailoring’ memory sometimes lead to subjecting the body to acts of aggression and violence.

Bapsi Sidwa’s *Ice Candy Man* has been more than often acclaimed as one of the finest novels on the partition of India on the eve of her independence and its gory details of the inhumanity and insanity that followed the partition of a once-unified nation into antagonistic sovereign nations with all the sickening madness narrated to the readers through the eyes of Lenny, a differently-abled Parsee girl. While it is usual to read *Ice Candy Man* as a third-party narrative of the holocaust of partition, it is also important to note the use of body in this novel as an important carrier of memory and markers of violence for both the Hindus as well as the Muslims. On the other hand, Taslima Nasrin’s controversial novel *Lajja* has been read and interpreted differently by different segments of readers and critics based on their subjective ‘positions’ vis-à-vis the text. Written in 1993, the book stirred up a storm among the Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh, the country of its origin, for allegedly portraying Islam in an unfavourable light.



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The novel narrates the experience of the Duttas – Sudhamoy, his wife Kironmoyee, and their two children, Suranjan and Maya. The Duttas have lived in Bangladesh all their lives and Sudhamoy had also participated and consequently suffered in the struggle for the country's independence during the 1970-71. But things begin to change and they gradually begin to find themselves at the receiving end of growing persecution of the Hindus at the hands of rising Islamic fundamentalist forces. In spite of being terrorized by the Muslim fundamentalists at every opportunity, they refuse to leave the country as most of their friends and relatives have done. It is a unique attachment and belief that Sudhamoy has which the translator terms as “a naïve mix of optimism and idealism”, that leads him to believe that his motherland will not let him down (1994, blurb). But things reach their height after the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in India on 6th of December 1992.

It is during this fallout of communalism that leads each member of the family to re-think their position as a minority in Bangladesh, and enter into a process of self-assessment and introspection. It is here that memory is used by the different family members of the Duttas to carve an identity for themselves through a process which places them both as within and outside the greater national identity of Bangladesh. This dualism in identity results out of the relationship which they have had down generations with the nation; their participation in the national life of the nation entitles them to be considered as insiders, and hence be placed them within the greater community of Bangladeshi citizens, yet at the same time, their religious and communal identity as Hindus differentiates them from the majority population of the Muslims, hence placing them into an alienated and marginalized identity in terms of communal political identity. The mockery of the ‘secular’ element in the Constitution of Bangladesh, which is gradually taken over by the fundamentalists is brought to the fore with the help of memory. The novel is replete with passages where references to the past and memory occur with diversified intentions and consequences, particularly those which tell of the ‘shift’ and dislocation of the Hindus as an inalienable part of Bangladeshi identity in the past to that of a harassed community in the present is also brought out sharply with the help of memory.

Though both Nasrin and Sidwa's novels deal with the ominous shadow of communalism in different geo-political and temporal spaces, there are inherent differences between the two. In *Lajja*, it is the Hindu minority which is projected as the repressed and violated group while in *Ice Candy Man*, both



the Hindus and the Muslims are victimized and violated based on which religious group holds the majority at a particular place and time. So, while *Lajja* circles around the harassment of the Hindus in Bangladesh in post-independence Bangladesh, the narrative of *Ice Candy Man* features human loss where Hindus and Muslims are equal victims of the insanity of partition. This aspect of Sidwa's novel, therefore, deals with both the 'body' of both communities in terms of violence and memory.

It has also been my intention in this paper to show how memory is sometimes attempted at being 'tailored' according to the demands of the time. In *Lajja*, such 'tailoring' of memory is important in the case of Sudhamoy and Suranjan, particularly in the case of the latter, as he deliberately tries to create a sort of 'counter-memory' to the atrocities done to him and his family. However, *Lajja* should not be regarded as a historical record of the events that took during the communal fallout of December 1992. Nasrin herself tries to steer clear out of political controversies when in 1994 she adds this 'Preface' to the novel:

While this is a novel and all the characters in the narrative are the product of my own imagination, and any resemblance they bear to actual people, living or dead, is entirely coincidental, I have also included in the text numerous incidents, actual historical events, facts and statistics. I have verified these to the best of my ability, my sources of information include *Ekota*, *Azker Kagoz*, *Bhorer Kagaz*, *Glani* (The disgrace), "Communal Persecution and Repression in Bangladesh", "Communal Discrimination in Bangladesh: Facts and Documents", and "Parishad Barta" (p. x).

Yet, there is no disputing the fact that a lot of history also goes into the making of the book.

In *Ice Candy Man*, the root cause for Ice Candy Man's horrifying treatment of Ayah, the woman he loves and yet subjects her to torture, can be traced to his horrific memory of seeing the gunny sack filled with the breasts of women who had been killed and mutilated on the other side of the border. If one leaves the ethical aspect of his act, his condemnable act can be interpreted as a desire to create a counter-memory, though not strictly in the Derridean sense of the term, so that he can move ahead with the burden of both memories; though both have been played on the body of women. Like Suranjan in *Lajja*, Ice Candy Man is also propelled by a desire for revenge by leaving the scars of violent memories on the body of the victim. The treatment of Ayah at the hands of the man who loves her and yet is



guided by an overwhelming sense of revenge shows how the three – violence, memory and the body are interlinked. This interlinking also serves as a propeller for future action as it contains the potential to erupt into a series of actions and reactions using the same tools.

So far ‘tailoring’ of memory is concerned, Suranjan’s act of trying to ‘create’ a counter-memory to the nagging feeling of impotency consequent to his inability of rescuing Maya leads him to pick up a girl – a prostitute – from the streets and torture her physically. He makes sure that the girl whom he picks up is a Muslim girl and he also makes sure that his making love to her should not give her any pleasure arising out of the flesh; rather, it should be a horrible and terrifying experience for her. For him, his atrocities on her were a symbolic act of taking revenge on a woman of the majority community for what they had done to his sister, Maya. The author describes the state of Suranjan’s mind in the following manner as he ravages her body:

Suranjan, however, did not look upon Shamima as a whore. To him, she was a girl who belonged to the majority community. He was longing to rape one of them, in revenge for what they had done to his sister (p. 200).

However, Suranjan is later filled with guilt and a feeling of vacuity. Indeed, he feels ashamed of what he had committed. It is as if he were face to face with the degradation he had pulled himself into since the demolition of the Babri Masjid. His angst is clearly described by the author in the following words:

He was actually feeling sorry for the girl whom he had torn apart with his manhood, bitten and caused to bleed profusely! If only he could have wiped away the blood from her cheeks before she left. Would he ever meet the girl again? He resolved that if he ever saw her again he would ask her forgiveness (p. 203).

Yet, the fact remains that in his desire to create a counter-memory, he had gone too far. He had committed the same act of trespassing that line of humanity of which his oppressor’s were guilty of. At this juncture, the tripartite sequence of violence as identified by Derrida is precisely applicable. The sequences, as discussed by Elizabeth Grosz are:

...the passage from the fluid existence of the thing in itself to the representation and fixation of the thing through “writing/violence” that takes away the “thingness” of the thing. This violence is the containment and ordering of the thing to give up its ‘thingness’



and to submit itself to the leveling of representation, a mythical and impossible leveling that assumes a self-identity the thing itself never possessed. (2003, 137) (quoted in Balasescu, 2004)

This three-sequenced process of violence is important in understanding why some acts of violence are socially deemed as 'justified' and 'lawful' and not perceived as cases of violence while others are taken as 'horrifying' and unlawful. The justification that the Ice Candy man uses to abduct Ayah forcibly and subsequently subjects her to the maximum of exploitation also shows the Derridean sequence of violence in operation.

Lajja begins with Suranjan and Nilanjana, alias Maya, in the morning after the demolition of Babri Masjid. The question of security looms large as the first words spoken in the novel are those of Maya, who raises issue when she asks her brother: "Dada, aren't you going to wake up and do something before it is too late?" (p.1) Immediately Suranjan is reminded of the events that had taken place a couple of years ago, on 30 October 1990, when Suranjan with his family had taken shelter at the house of a Muslim friend, Kamal, out of fear that some harm might come to their family in the hands of miscreants. This memory of the past, which seems about to repeat itself, leads him to ponder over the question of his identity in relation to the nation at large. Further, given the changing circumstances, Suranjan could not be sure if they would remain safe even if they were to move to the house of a Muslim friend. His thoughts are immediately October of 1990. The list is a long one, running to about two pages. Suranjan felt that given the widespread violence that had taken place during that time, he and his family had been lucky to have escaped it.

Just as the narration for Suranjan begins with a reference to his memories, his father Sudhamoy is also introduced to the readers in terms of memory:

In the other room, his father Sudhamoy also thought about the past. When he was a young man all his aunts and uncles had begun to leave Bangladesh one by one. As the trains pulled out from Mymensingh on their way to Phulbaria, the guard's whistle would invariably be accompanied by the heartbroken wails of people leaving the only country they knew (p. 6).



Sudhamoy remembers how every time his father refused the call of his relatives and friends to leave Bangladesh and migrate to India. He also remembers having witnessed and participated in a number of historically important events and recalls how he had participated actively in 1952 in the Bengalis' agitation for the use of Bengali (*Bangla*) as the national language. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the Pakistani head of the state (Pakistan and East Pakistan), had declared that Urdu would be the sole national language of Pakistan including East Pakistan, (erstwhile Bangladesh). Sudhamoy had also participated in the 1969 National Movement as well and remembers how important events in the history of Bangladesh, like the United Front elections of 1954, the Education Movement of 1962, the Six Clause Movement of 1966, the Agartala Conspiracy Case, the General Elections of 1970 and the Freedom Movement of 1971 were rallying points for the conscious youth of the country. It is important to note how Sudhamoy traces most of the events in a chronological manner and at the same time does not fail to record how the Hindus as a community were persecuted by the Muslim soldiers. He refers to his own experience as a Hindu physically tortured and broken. It is indeed important to note how amidst all the memories, his identity as a Hindu is built on the basis of difference based on religion. His experiences of 1971 were such that he could not come of the trauma he had felt then. The author describes his experiences and its later effect in the following words:

In time, the injuries Sudhamoy had received from his captors – a broken leg, three broken bones in his rib cage – had healed as had the wounds on his brutally mutilated penis, but the scars on his heart would always remain. Sudhamoy had never really recovered from his incarceration during the country's war of independence. He had returned alive from the camp but only just, and ever since he had never felt truly alive. The life of deception and fear he had lived since then had not improved his mental state either (p. 38-9).

It is because of his memories of the War that he finds it difficult to come to terms with the fact that the passage of power into the hands of fundamentalists has left no space for him and his family in the country which he considered his own.

Memories of violence and the realization that they, as Hindus are seen collectively as a single body to be oppressed by the fundamental government of Bangladesh leads the father and the son to perceive events in different manners in terms of their memories and understanding of their current



situation. While for Sudhamoy it is a question of acceptance or rejection in his own nation, for his son Suranjan, who had spent a fair amount of time being politically engaged, it is a failure and a mockery of the founding principles of the country's Constitution:

The State of Bangladesh was founded on the basis of four major principles: nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism...Beginning with the Language Movement in 1952, the struggle had been long and arduous but independence had finally been achieved. In the process, the evils of communalism and religious fanaticism were defeated. After independence, the reactionaries who had been against the very spirit of independence had gained power, changed the face of the constitution and revived the evils of communalism and unbending fundamentalism that had been rejected during the war of independence. (p. 42-3).

As Suranjan mentally catalogues the list of atrocities committed on Hindus in the 1979 communal riots, the reader is faced with a difference from the pattern of atrocities committed in the 1971 events to the out and out communal riots in 1979. The catalogue of Suranjan is filled with instances of atrocities and brutality committed on women, such as rape, gang rape and rape in custody, which were comparatively fewer in Sudhamoy's list. It is clear that the degree of oppression carried out in the name of religion have now scaled newer heights, and found a preferable target in the female. Another important feature to note in Suranjan's list is the frequency of threats to Hindus that they should leave the country, which is indeed a sea-change from the earlier days when both the Hindus and the Muslims fought shoulder to shoulder for the country's independence from Pakistani rule. When one takes into consideration cases like the one listed below, it is clear that the authority are also hand in glove with the fundamentalist forces in making life difficult for the Hindus in Bangladesh, so that their ultimate option remains to flee the country and enter India:

In the Abirdia village of Shibpur subdistrict, in Narshindi district, Nripendra Sengupta and his wife, Anima Sengupta were locked up in an advocate's house, while they were cheated of 8.75 bighas of land. The property was registered in someone else's name. On 27 March 1979, Anima made a written complaint to the Narshindi Police Superintendent that she was being harassed by some people; the neighbours were too scared to say



anything against the accused. Anima was taken into police custody and was tortured for four days before she was released (p. 43).

In fact, Suranjan's mental catalogue is a long one, registering forty-five instances and running about seven pages in length (p. 43-50).

A parallelism with Suranjan's mental catalogue can be observed to the instances of communal atrocities in Sidwa's novel when one considers the incidents witnessed by Lenny. The arson incident with petrol being sprayed from the pipes of fire brigades on the already burning houses instead of water; the cut body of the Masseur packed in the gunny bag; the rape of Ayah, etc., add to the horror of the violence of partition inflicted upon the community and the individuals bodied members.

An observation made a little while ago that in the women the fundamentalists found a source of 'soft target' is also evident from the fact that Suranjan's sister Maya is forcefully abducted by a gang of hooligans consisting of local boys when Suranjan was not at home. Even as he seeks the help of one of his Muslim friends to locate the whereabouts of his sister, the search proves futile; of course, there are more than enough hints for the reader to understand that the search conducted was not a whole-hearted one. In *Ice Candy Man* the inhuman treatment of Ayah and the women in several incidents as narrated in the novel, particularly the women who were killed and whose body parts were packed in gunny bags and sent to Lahore and the collective rape women in Ranna's village also show how women are considered the ultimate victims of violence and their bodies are used as sites for leaving the marks of atrocities.

If Maya in *Lajja* and Ayah in *Ice Candy Man* are victimized because they belong to the 'other' community, there are other characters in *Ice Candy Man* who undergo religious conversion to escape such fate. Conversion into Christianity or undergoing circumcision and accepting Islam is sought by them as the possible and most effective way of escaping the scourge of violence and saving their body, which in turn, is saving themselves. It is also interesting mark here that circumcision itself leaves a mark on the body as an indicator of religious affiliation.

In *Lajja*, the author tries to trace the roots of this communal and religious discrimination in the 'Divide and Rule' policy which the British Government had adopted during the colonial days in India. She blames both the Muslim League and the Congress equally for spreading the poison of communalism in the Indian sub-continent. In her words:



In 1906, it was thanks to the British that the Muslim League had been founded on communal principles. It was this party that was responsible for vitiating the social and political atmosphere with the poison of communalism. But then the Congress could not escape blame either (p. 181).

Regarding the resurgence of communalism in Bangladesh, she writes:

After the attainment of independence, amongst four clauses, a clause that enshrined secularism was included in the Constitution of Bangladesh. This was an invincible weapon against the possible resurrection of communalism. But after 15 August 1975, communalism was reborn. Along with it came the forces of fundamentalism, fanaticism, malice and despotism (p. 181).

And all this was given an idealistic disguise. After the 8th Amendment in 1988, Islam is made the State religion. The gradual unfolding of history done through the memory of Sudhamoy, presents to the readers a process which shows the initial ideals of secularism being slowly overtaken by the religious elements. His tortured and broken body in the novel appears as the symbolic reflection of representation of his scarred memories. The feeling of distaste and victimization is perhaps more acute in the case of Sudhamoy because he had always felt himself linked to the fate of Bangladesh.

Another important instance in *Ice Candy Man* where the body is perceived as a carrier of memory is in the case of the several unfortunate women who are ostracized and live in a separate house where Godmother and other women take care of them and try to send them to their respective homes. Most of these women were either abducted or forcibly kept during the violent period, yet the families of many are reluctant and even refuse to accept them back because they view them as reminders of the violence upon their community and religion.

So far the body is concerned in its relation to violence and memory in the two novels taken for discussion in this paper, the male bodies are also subjected to the same type of treatment as that of the female bodies and they turn into carriers of the memories of violence. The young Sikh boy, Ranna, in *Ice Candy Man* is one such example, just as the old man Sudhamoy in *Lajja* is another. Both are victims of the irrationality that reigns large during periods of violence; and in both the cases, it is religion that drives the people towards inhuman acts. The half-moon shaped scar that young Ranna carries on his head will serve as a constant reminder of violence for him so long he stays alive. For Sudhamoy, his



incapacity to sexually satisfy his wife because of the damage caused to his sexual organ by the fundamentalists continues to erode him from within. In both the cases, the body becomes the site where violence and memory operate simultaneously. The traumatic memories are also revived by the body's association to those events. Such acceptance of the connection between the body and memory has the potential to support the 'body memory' hypothesis.

In *Lajja*, it is not that only the male characters have memories, or whose memories help the readers to assess the changes taking place in a better light. Kironmoyee's memories of the house they earlier lived in and which they had to sell because the 'majority' there had made life difficult for them, haunts her constantly; but being a woman she rarely allowed her emotions to come to the surface. She hardly spoke of the things she missed from her earlier house, or how she found it difficult to adjust within the limited space of their new house – which again, they may have to leave.

The analysis of the two novels as presented above indicates towards the conclusion that violence, memory and body share a complex yet inalienable relationship among themselves. Both *Ice Candy Man* and *Lajja* present how the human body, irrespective of gender, is transformed into a site for domination and control through violence and how in the process, it becomes a carrier for the marks of trauma whose scars and long-term affect can be perceived at the level of the physical as well as the psychological.

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