

Communalism and the Discourse of Minority Women in Select Indian English Fictions

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Abstract: *Communal discourse in present-day India has had a momentous impact on women belonging to minority ethno-religious communities. Either as victims of rape, mutilation and murder whose bodies and identities emerge as sites of revenge, or as pawns in the hands of a patriarchal and opportunistic state, identitarian politics and violence has diversely affected the social, political, economic and psychological status of minority women in the present milieu. However, despite the highly nuanced nature of their subjugation, dominant socio-political narratives have been conspicuous in their inability to enunciate the peculiar predicament of minority women in the nation. On the other hand, contemporary fiction has sought to sensitively map the inner terrain of the minority women caught in a vortex of gender and religion. In the process, it emerges as a forum that assiduously articulates and at same time challenges the silence and the invisibility that has largely come to symbolize their existence within the nation.*

Through an analysis of postcolonial fictions that emanate from the collective violence unleashed in the anti-Sikh massacre of 1984, the demolition of Babri masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 and the Gujarat pogrom in 2002, this paper attempts to examine the representation of women belonging to minority religious communities in India. In what can be regarded as a powerful and radical feminist critique, these narratives use myriad strategies of representation and technique to foreground the complex and multi-faceted nature of their subjugation and thereby present a slice of life of minority women in the nation. Furthermore, these fictions, in many ways, can be read as counter narratives or studies in resistance as they interrogate and unravel the politics of suppression that governs nationalist discourses thereby offering perspectives on the secular underpinnings of the nation-state.

Keywords: *Communalism, Partition, 1984 anti-Sikh riots, 2002 Gujarat pogrom, Hindu Nationalist Discourse, Personal laws, Historiography, Subaltern.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary studies in feminism have challenged the assumption that ‘sisterhood is global’ (Spivak, 64). In other words, it has become problematic to treat all women as being in the same category and thereby generalize their interests regardless of differences in race, class, ethnicity, nation and religion. As a result, though the institutionalization of patriarchy has been universal, the notion of women being united by ‘common’ interests and experiences has been deeply contested (D’ Costa, 15). Nonetheless, women across cultures, religions and nations continue to represent a minority—a subjugated, inferior, marginalized, silenced and victimized entity in many ways.

Though almost universally regarded as ‘the second sex’, women play a primary role in outlining the boundaries of any ethnic/political/national community. The gender-specific nature of violence evident in different parts of the globe—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Haiti, Somalia, Peru, Rwanda, Bosnia, Uganda, Sudan and Sierra Leone, to name a few—underscores the reality that women’s identities are central to the processes of nationalism and the creation of nation-states. In any nationalist discourse, women play a central role in the imagination and construction of the nation-state where the nation is often venerated as a female, especially as a mother, drawing upon images of purity, honour, and nurture. The reality, however, is that this association renders

their bodies vulnerable to the 'outsider' or the 'other'. Therefore, in moments of war and in nation-building processes, violence against women is charged with a deeply symbolic meaning. It is a deliberate act, equalizing and retaliatory in nature, strategically used to humiliate and assault the 'enemy' or the 'other' community. Feminist scholars, therefore, argue that narratives of nationhood are essentially gendered narratives that privilege women's bodies as battlefields on which nationalistic wars are fought.

In South Asia, the discourse on Partition has highlighted the fact that 1947 is not emblematic of a 'predictable divide', as it had, and still continues to have, different connotations for the people of two (later three) nations (Kaul, 11). Yet what unites countless and diverse explorations into this watershed moment is the recognition of the immutable truth, glossed over in official/nationalist historiographies—that violence of a gendered nature played a central role in the formation of the nation states of India and Pakistan. Various official and unofficial sources claim that during Partition about 75,000 to 1,00,000 women were supposed to have been abducted, raped, subjected to indescribable sexual violence and humiliation, forced to convert, and brutalized by men of other communities (and sometimes by men of their own community). Hence, Partition unfolded as a tragedy of singularly colossal proportions for women, for, as pointed out:

... [They] became targets of a particular form of public violence, and whose dislocation and homelessness, rape and abduction is, in hindsight, at once the most visible, and the most repressed, index of the social, cultural and familial fragmentation that constituted Partition (Ibid).

Thus, even a perfunctory analysis of communalism in India reveals that women have been 'centrally implicated' in the exercise of imagining and crystallizing homogenous identities (Butalia, "Muslims and Hindus", 59). While in 1947, 'the political programme of creating the two nations of India and Pakistan was inscribed upon the bodies of women' (Das, *Critical Events*, 56), the emergence of communalism as the 'master narrative' of the socio-political fabric of the contemporary Indian nation-state has emphatically proved that the appropriation of women's identities did not end with 1947. The question of gender dominates every skirmish between religious groups, commonly labelled as the 'communal riot', and it also figures prominently in the question of reform which has largely succumbed to the secular/communal rhetoric. Scholarly studies have, thus, emphasized that in the subcontinent the relationship between gender and religious/communal politics is inherently problematic as it has often played itself out in complex, diverse and multiple ways.

Since nationalisms and nation-states pivot on the construction of a unitary national identity, they are capable of suppressing differences and overriding minority voices. Thus, in a multicultural nation-state such as India, where religion continues to be a primary marker of identity, women of a minority community represent a minority-within-a-minority, or as Luce Irigaray puts it, they symbolise 'the other of the other' (1985). Comprising an entity that is doubly marginalized, first by virtue of being women and secondly, by being born in a religion, they also operate within multiple layers of patriarchal structures of power represented by the men folk of their family, community leaders and finally, the state. The latter, though theoretically secular, often functions in ways that prove to be hostile and detrimental to the interests of minority women.

1.1. Impact of Contemporary Communalism on Minority Women

The progressive communalization of post-colonial India has had definite implications for women in general and for women belonging to religious minorities in particular. Women of minority religious groups have been diversely affected in post-1947 India. First, they emerge as soft targets in instances of communal violence, which is largely directed against minorities. The nation, in the last six decades or so, has witnessed countless incidents of sexual violence and killing that bring back memories of Partition. The persecution of Sikh women in 1984, Muslim women in countless riots (especially in Gujarat 2002) and Christian women, including nuns, foregrounds their relative susceptibility.

Secondly, a recent development has further added to their woes. It has been noted that along with men, women have also been at the forefront in promoting communal violence, instigating men during riots to rape and kill minority women. Traditionally, women are regarded as vulnerable

victims who bear the maximum brunt in moments of mass violence, but communal violence in postcolonial India has opened up many new trajectories where women's relationship with violence, religion and politics have challenged certain assumptions that primarily cast women in the role of a victim (Sarkar, "Heroic Women, Mother Goddess", 185). Consequently, women have also been identified as perpetrators or militants in contemporary communal violence, thus complicating the discourse of victimhood. It has been found that women have been actively involved in the Ayodhya Ramjanmabhoomi movement and the Gujarat violence, both at leadership levels and in mass participation. This 'feminine Hindu nationalist movement' has inspired and equipped scores of ordinary women to assume the role of the quintessential Hindu woman as a destroyer of evil, often perceived to be Muslim or Christian (Bacchetta, "All our goddesses are armed", 133-155). As Menon and Nigam point out, television images from the days of violence in Gujarat in 2002 illustrate this to chilling effect:

Hindu women laugh and chat together in the winter sun on the rooftop, smiling shyly at television cameras as they make missiles and firebombs with homely materials: old saris, stones, kerosene oil from their kitchens. Much as they might get together to make pickles and papads at other times (40).

Thus, the virulence of the Hindu Right, which places women against women, has acutely magnified the problems of minority women in the present milieu.

And lastly, the question of gender reform again brings into sharp focus the precarious correlation between minority women and the state. In a nation where personal laws largely signify the 'authentic' traditions of communities, issues concerning women's rights, like the implementation of a uniform civil code, or the need to push for social reform, have succumbed to the secular/communal rhetoric (Mukhopadhyay, 108). The 1986 Shah Bano case, a landmark in the communalization of Indian polity, exemplified how Muslim women became pawns in the hands of a religious leadership that was keen on preserving the notion of a homogenous community united by common symbols and an opportunistic state equally intent on securing a considerable votebank (Hasan, 64). Christian women, too, are in a similar predicament and have repeatedly sought amendments in their family laws (Jaising, 59-69). Interpreted as a challenge to religious tenets, key issues concerning minority women such as divorce, maintenance, and inheritance of property have become politicized, thereby severely affecting their socio-economic status. Though the state's position has been largely ambivalent, it has, through its actions, very decisively weakened the status of minority women in legal and constitutional terms.

2. LITERARY RESPONSES AND REPRESENTATIONS

While there may be exceptions, it can be said that dominant socio-political narratives have largely been conspicuous in their inability to enunciate the peculiar predicament of minority women in post-colonial India. In many socio-political discourses, minority women largely emerge as essentialised entities. Or, alternately, they simply exist as statistics that contribute to comment on the overall growth of a community. Paradoxically, it can be said that contemporary fiction sensitively maps the inner terrain of the minority women caught in a vortex of gender and religion, and in the process emerges as a forum that assiduously articulates and at same time challenges the silence and the invisibility that has largely come to symbolize their existence in the nation.

2.1. Githa Hariharan's in Times of Siege

The minority woman is a prominent figure in the literary narratives borne out of the debilitating violence of 1984, 1992-93, and 2002. Githa Hariharan's novel *In Times of Siege* (2003) contains a portrayal of two women belonging to minority groups—Jasbir Kaur and Mrs. Khan. Jasbir Kaur was pregnant when both her father and husband were brutally killed in the '84 riots. Completely devastated by the appalling tragedy, Jasbir miscarried a week later. However, she convinces other Sikh women victims, who were tired of repeating their ordeal to perfect strangers, to speak fearlessly and share the horrors faced by them. As she tells: "I have lost so much—I have nothing left in my stomach but anger. I also have a hunger that says, tell your story, tell it again and again to whoever will listen" (34).

2.1.1. *Remembering the Horrors of 1984*

It is generally and rightly felt that the Sikh massacre of 1984 was exclusively targeted at eliminating Sikh males (Chakravarty and Haksar, 21). Sikh women were seldom killed by mobs and statistics too point out that the ratio of male-female casualties has been highly disproportionate. However, it would be too facile to say that women were entirely unaffected by the massacre. The fact that the death of one or almost all male members of a family brings about a colossal change in the lives of women does not need to be underscored. Moreover, as is the case with the predicament of women in instances of riots and communal clashes, Sikh women, too, have been subjected to other forms of violence—torture, sexual humiliation and rape (though for fear of social ostracism, it is not easily accepted by the victims) (Kishwar, 14-15). Furthermore, the denial of justice by the state is its refusal to actively pursue the cases, coupled with highly inadequate rehabilitation measures (a paltry compensatory sum of rupees ten thousand promised to the widow/mother of a dead man) that proved to be futile in the long run in addressing the problems of the destitute women who were left to the mercy of independent relief workers or the men of their own community.

Therefore, Githa Hariharan uses Jasbir Kaur's anguish as a vehicle to foreground an issue that has rarely found prominence in socio-political debates, that is, the suffering entailed by Sikh women in the 1984 massacre. Jasbir Kaur's articulation of her grief constitutes a symbolic act of defiance. By insisting that her story be recorded, she defies the silence that has been inflicted upon her by the state where the trauma of such women is either submerged in governmental records or is simply forgotten, thereby, reducing women like her to the status of second class citizens. Jasbir Kaur's act reiterates that the horrors of communal violence never die down. They are reconstructed through memory, and retelling their trauma empowers them to present their own perspective, voice their own concerns and predicament, thereby becoming symbols of courage and anger.

2.1.2. *Fictionalizing the Concerns of Muslim Women in India*

Given the deplorable socio-economic profile of Muslims, their absence in positions of power, and the angst of being endlessly subjected to communal violence, the predicament of Muslim women is not very different. A recent survey on Muslim women, conducted by Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, provides some illuminating facts. They point out that with the possible exception of the scheduled caste women, Muslim women probably comprise the poorest, and signify the most disadvantaged group, in India (Menon and Hasan, 6). Currently available statistical studies on the lives of Muslim women reiterate the popular perception that they embody the 'most disadvantaged, economically impoverished and politically marginalized sections of India today' (ibid, 3). However, their disadvantaged status cannot be attributed to religion alone as is the generally perceived. It is also a manifestation of complex forces that are at play. As Hasan and Menon point out:

The axes of class, gender, and community are contingent on each other for they are constructed and experienced simultaneously, and thus create overlapping and mutually reinforcing forms of disadvantage and deprivation... [Muslim women] are disadvantaged... as members of a minority community, as women, and as poor women.... Gender discrimination coalesces with class inequalities in perpetuating a structured disempowerment of Muslim women (242).

In the novel, Jasbir Kaur and Mrs. Khan can be regarded as antithetical to each other. Mrs. Khan is not a victim of communal violence and consequently, has not suffered like Jasbir Kaur. While the brave Sikh woman, having lost everything, still believes in voicing her trauma, Mrs. Khan seeks refuge in silence. She exists as a mute witness to the drama of communal hatred that is played out in her presence. Academicians such as the Head of the Department and Arya, Hindu right-wing ideologues to the core, pointedly and willfully oblivious of her presence and feelings, customarily make objectionable references to her community and vent their fury on the existence of minorities in the nation. The narrative reinforces how her existence and identity is defined and circumscribed by her faith:

Muslim Mrs. Khan, Foreign Mrs. Khan. Mrs. Khan, a woman who had travelled leagues from her grandmother's and mother's lives to work in an office and make a modest contribution to the family income...is pushed back to square one, to the old diminishing religious identity (20).

In her portrayal of Mrs. Khan, Hariharan breaks away from some of the stereotypes that are seen as characteristic of Muslim women. Working as the secretary to the head of the History Department in the university, Mrs. Khan is neither uneducated nor veiled. Nevertheless, her silence, in the face of the humiliation that is meted out to her, seems to be at odds with the image of a modern working woman. Though apparently contradictory, Hariharan's rendition of Mrs. Khan's character is very realistic and perfect, given her vulnerable situation in the socio-political

Dynamics of the present milieu. Mrs. Khan's silence is not unusual and is a natural consequence of her deep recognition of the fact that she is a woman and also a Muslim. Her silence can be construed as a symbol of her marginalized status and powerlessness, or alternately, it can be also seen as tactic of defense.

However, viewed through the lens of the Hindu nationalist discourse, the behavior of the department and the corresponding silence and invisibility of Mrs. Khan is hardly surprising. Paula Bacchetta points out that though Muslim women rarely appear in its discourse, they, nonetheless, constitute an indispensable aspect of the Hindu nationalist discourse, and their representation is an inversion of the highly idealized depiction of Hindu women ("Communal Property/Sexual Property", 192). Hence, in keeping with the image perpetuated by militant Hindutva ideology that largely caricatures Muslim women as immoral and enslaved, Mrs. Khan's silence, though thrust upon her, is absolutely natural and a general attribute of women belonging to the Muslim community.

Mrs. Khan, therefore, is also a victim though her trauma is largely invisible. Hariharan's narrative probes the unease of a woman working in a predominantly male-dominated space where her religious identity only serves to accentuate her sense of alienation while at the same time exposing the everyday realities of the communal dimension that silently push people like her to the margins.

2.2. Rukun Advani's Beethoven Among the Cows

The vulnerability of minority women in contemporary India is also sharply etched out in *Beethoven Among the Cows* (1994). Like Hariharan, Rukun Advani uses silence as a motif to delineate the troubled psyche of Ms. Susan. On their train journey to Agra in December 1992, the narrator encounters two women—Mrs. A. Sen, an old lady from Calcutta and a young Ms. Susan, who they surmise is a nurse from Kerala. While the talkative and friendly Mrs. Sen openly expresses her displeasure at the prevailing atmosphere of divisiveness and violence in the nation, and yearns for the age of Nehru, the young woman is singularly tongue-tied and tense, hardly venturing a word or an opinion on any subject throughout the journey. Though she gives an impression of being bored or simply uninterested, the narrator realizes that her feelings are tightly wound up and she refuses to be drawn in a conversation that, according to her, treads on dangerous ground. Therefore, just as Mrs. Khan, her silence also emanates out of a deep sense of fear, suspicion and anxiety. A juxtaposition of the two women reveals that the inherent difference in their attitudes can be attributed to their differing faiths. Mrs. Sen, by virtue of being a Hindu, is empowered to express her opinions freely without even fearing the presence of a right-wing ideologue in the compartment, whereas Ms. Susan's silence exposes the paranoia of minority communities which exist in a realm of insecurity and fear.

2.3. Raj Kamal Jha's Fireproof

Raj Kamal Jha's novel *Fireproof* (2007) fictionalizes the realities of the 2002 Gujarat pogrom. In the novel, Shabnam is also denied the privilege of articulating her story. A survivor of the 2002 violence, who lost her parents and barely escaped being raped, Shabnam's ordeal is chronicled by Ms. Glass in the form of an e-mailed document. Jha's use of e-mails as testimony can be termed as a brilliant narrative ploy. In the terrifyingly repressive atmosphere of the state, it was almost impossible for people, let alone women, to come out in the open and share their stories of horror with the world. Consequently, it was largely the relief organizations and social workers, who

painstakingly documented the narratives of cruelty, brutality and injustice. Thus, in the age of technological advancements, the e-mail in the novel highlights alternative ways of countering silence and recovering truth.

Ms. Glass, by choosing to tell the world about Shabnam, fills in the role of a relief agent. She probes the victim's consciousness and captures her innermost emotions that oscillate between fear, rage, frustration, and retribution. Shabnam is filled with painful memories of death and fears of an uncertain future. The e-mail points out that ideally, Shabnam should be filled with rage at the insensitivity of the world that neither comes to her rescue nor seems even remotely affected by her tragedy. Her anger should be directed at her neighbours who do not hear the screams of her parents, and her classmate's father who refuses all help by telling her to call him up later (196).

The narrative uses a range of representational techniques such as irony, black humour, and stream of consciousness, as it moves back and forth in time to concentrate on the inner turmoil of the survivor/witness. It underscores her trauma by juxtaposing her powerlessness with an all-powerful but temporarily out-of-action state. Jha, very sarcastically, foregrounds how 'normal' emotions such as hatred and revenge, and 'normal' alternatives for seeking justice such as appealing to the law and order agencies are not available to Shabnam, for she is too insignificant to dream of justice, fair play, or exacting revenge. The narrative reveals that it is only magic that can help her avenge the death of her parents. Magic can thrust an AK-47 into her hands that will fire an 'unlimited round of bullets', which will eliminate her enemies. Or, magic can increase her size manifold:

Until I ... am so big that my eyes full of tears will become as huge as water-tanks, hot and steaming, the water mixed with the fire, the heat gurgling, the vapour fierce and hot. ... And I will walk all over you and yours, your loved ones, your next of kin, your house, your living rooms, the marble floors, the granite counters in the kitchen, your wind chimes in the window.... I will then prise open your mouths open, pull your tongues out, slit them, one by one, drop the tongues, pink and black and brown and yellow, drop them into the sewer pipes that overflow by the side of the street (197-98).

The novel brings to light the limited choices of rehabilitation or justice that young women in her circumstances have by hinting at the twisted turn of events that await her. Ms. Glass, in a detached and ruthless manner, envisages Shabnam's future when she says that Shabnam will have to return home to whatever's left of it, and will be forced to seek food and shelter with those very neighbours who had turned deaf ears to the cries of her parents. With biting irony, Jha's novel questions the only option that is available for people like Shabnam:

Forget all, the past has been burnt. So start remembering from today because you haven't been raped, you haven't been killed, you haven't been burnt alive? (204)

2.4. Githa Hariharan's Fugitive Histories

Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in their work, *Borders and Boundaries*, observe that while the Partition of 1947 disrupted the lives of millions, particularly women, it ironically, also proved to be liberating in many ways. The need for economic survival coupled with the 'breakdown of traditional constraints on their mobility' propelled thousands of women on the path of education enabling them to enter public spaces for the first time (205). Githa Hariharan's novel *Fugitive Histories* (2009), too, explores the paradoxical effects of the chilling violence of 2002 on women. The novel, centring on the lives of the Muslim women in a relocated colony in Ahmedabad evocatively captures how the upheaval caused by violence and migration pushes women from the threshold of domesticity into the outside world. It traces the first tentative steps that these women take towards recovery and independence, and records the daily battles that they wage in the face of excruciating losses. In an attempt to reconstruct their lives, the women inhabiting the colony sew skirts which are then sold with the help of NGOs. Before 2002, Yasmeen's father had a decent business. Her mother was a house wife with no worries or complaints. Post 2002, they are emotionally and financially drained. Yasmeen's mother is forced to incessantly work on the sewing machine so that her school fees can be paid and her father's medicines can be bought. Even young children, who should ideally be in school, attend sewing classes or learn to make kites to supplement family incomes. Hariharan, thus, explores how women's lives are drastically

transformed by such experiences, foregrounding the manner in which, within their own familial and community circles, they are forced to take on roles that they had never envisaged.

However, the liberating aspect of violence is just an infinitesimal part of the story. With the notion of honour being so deeply entrenched, it cannot be overlooked that one of the ways in which women are directly affected in the aftermath of violence is the manner in which issues pertaining to women's empowerment such as education, equality and gender justice take a back seat. In the name of defending a community and its women, community and religious leaders often take a regressive stand vis-à-vis women that equates to an infringement of their basic rights. The narrative, exploring the essentially contradictory ramifications of communalism, reinforces how violence recasts women as keepers of faith and heightens their awareness of vulnerability, often undoing whatever little progress women may have been achieved. Hariharan's narrative, therefore, captures the predicament of women caught between their own dreams and the community's dictates.

In the novel, many people in the re-settled colony are unable to understand why Yasmeen's parents are so keen on their daughter's education. Many object to her going to school and some are shocked to know that she even intends to go to college. Her friend Sultana's education has been discontinued although she is even younger than Yasmeen. This decision is driven by both necessity and fear. Her mother cannot afford to send her to school and she is instead sent to learn sewing to contribute to the household expenses. Moreover, given the existing paranoia, safety emerges as a major concern. Many of the families feel that it is 'dangerous for our girls to travel, anything can happen' thereby choosing a cloistered life for young girls and women (227). Therefore, young girls are also pressured to marry early and there is a greater insistence on following the *hijab*. On being advised that Yasmeen take the veil if she goes to college, her mother retorts:

The angry ones on both sides want to put our daughters in burqas so that they can prove their point. Did their burqas keep our women safe five years ago? (227)

2.4.1. *Women, Violence and Language*

In her research on the experience of violence, Urvashi Butalia points out that men and women speak differently about violence (*The Other Side of Silence*, 12-13). While the men are more concerned with the broad political realities, women largely spoke of the personal losses they entailed during such experiences. Rowena Robinson, in her research on the lives of Muslims survivors of communal violence, also acknowledges the difference:

[M]en speak more in terms of larger narratives of community identity and politics. Constantly grazing against community norms in the small and big strifes of everyday life, women perhaps incline less towards this language, for they understand too surely its insidious capacity to recoil on them (148).

Fugitive Histories, too, highlights this difference. Sara and her friend Nina, working on a documentary on 2002, record the sufferings of survivor-victims who collect together for work, where, invariably or almost compulsively, their talk veers towards their personal tragedies. The stories of these women—Nasreen, Feroza, Reshma, Najma, Zainab and many others are strikingly similar. Though haunted by searing memories of humiliation, loss and pain, the accounts of these women, nonetheless, are not overtly concerned with their communal identity. Rather, it is the sense of gross injustice, of being unfairly targeted in their own nation that angers them. As a woman complains, "We are orphans. We have no one, no police, no government, no country" (164). Though some of them do speak of being 'better prepared' for the next time, there is a general and an earnest wish to escape the viciousness of violence. A woman rues the fact that community leaders instead of setting up a school spend money on building a mosque. Another woman points out, "People don't want revenge, they want to *live* again.... People *need* to live again" (165-166).

Veena Das points out that in the absence of any customary forms of sharing or mourning available to the victim/survivor, the survivor needs to tell her story again and again ("Our Work to Cry", 345-398). For these women too, the very act of telling and re-telling their stories is, primarily, a kind of catharsis. Thus, in the novel, their workplace emerges as a symbol of an essentially female

space which provides them with an opportunity to uninhibitedly express their feelings, which, in a male domain, may not be heard. The articulation of their grief, repeatedly, also incorporates a feeble hope that once heard their stories may get them justice and may provide the long-awaited closure to the tragedy.

3. CONCLUSION

Taken together, these diverse narratives, standing at the interface of reality and fiction, represent a kind of historiography that captures the trauma of communalism in the nation. Since there cannot be one authentic history, these narratives offer an alternate 'truth' or perspective, apart from the more popular and 'official' narratives. These literary writers, assuming the role of a historian, imaginatively resurrect some of the most shameful moments in the nation's past and foreground the plight of the severely marginalized and oppressed sections of Indian society. By fictionalizing the lives and concerns of minority women in a deeply communalized contemporary India, these novels offer a view of "history from below". That is, it can be said that these narratives belong to the realm of subaltern history. In attempting to draw attention to the complex situation of minority women in the nation, the novels not only focus on the trauma of the survivor-victim but also elucidate the ways in which contemporary communal discourse, either surreptitiously or openly, affects the daily lives of these women thereby capturing the ways in which minority women are virtually excluded from the nation and national discourse. Employing myriad strategies of representation, discourses and techniques, these novels, therefore, interrogate and challenge 'the silence and the silencing of women's narratives' (D'Costa, 13).

Seen from this perspective, these multilayered fictions can be read as counter narratives that challenge the 'unity in diversity' rhetoric underwritten by the nationalist/dominant narratives. These novels exist as counter narratives on two levels. First, thematically speaking, these writers, through their literary endeavours address an issue which for a variety of reasons is still considered taboo in socio-political circles. Furthermore, these novels, by imaginatively recording traumatic events and their impact on the nation and its people, revisit and thereby memorialize these violent episodes. By doing so, these narratives do not just challenge the secular and democratic underpinnings of the nation but also point out to the aporias in the nationalist discourse that is neither able to fully accommodate nor account for the silencing of individuals/communities/events in its framework. Thus, these novels can be said to constitute a discourse that simultaneously foregrounds, resists and unravels the politics of silence that marks the contemporary socio-political climate of the nation.

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