Lisa Freigang

‘There Was No Looking Away’

Representations of Post-Partition Communal Violence in Indian English Literature

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1. Introduction: Narrating Communal Violence in Contemporary Indian English Fiction

A "noble mansion … where all her children may dwell" – that was Jawaharlal Nehru's vision for India when the country became independent from British rule in August of 1947 (Nehru 2). When the decades-long nonviolent freedom movement made Indian independence a reality, Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India, spread cautious optimism about India's future on the eve of independence: "We end today a period of ill fortune and India discovers herself again…. The achievement we celebrate today is but a step, an opening of opportunity, to the greater triumphs and achievements that await us." (ibid. 1)

Independence, however, was accompanied by the partition of the subcontinent along religious lines, as East and West Pakistan were created as new Muslim homelands. Nehru's hope that "the pains of labour" preceding "the birth of freedom" would cease after independence was not immediately fulfilled (ibid.). Instead, partition led to bloodshed and countless outbreaks of violence between Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims. The number of people killed in these waves of communal violence between 1946 and 1948 is estimated to be between 250,000 and 1 million.[1]

In the first decade and a half after partition, the number of violent incidents between members of different religious communities remained low. In the Indian elections of the early 1950s, political parties promoting communalism – and thereby the "belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion they have, as a result, common social, political and economic interests" (Chandra, *Communalism* 1) – obtained piteous results. Foreign and national commentators optimistically proclaimed that "communalism has failed, probably finally" (qtd. in Guha 644). Politics based on religion seemed to have no future in the secular, democratic state that independent India had become and communal violence – the term describing violence targeting people specifically due to their religious identity (Chopra et al. 13) – was hoped to be a thing of the past.[2]

However, as a succession of severe riots in the 1960s first indicated, this optimism turned out to be premature; the underlying communal tensions had not been overcome for good.[3] The 1980s were marked by a continued rise in the number of communal in-

1 *The New Yorker* article "The Great Divide: The Violent Legacy of the Partition" speaks of 1 million dead until 1948 (Dalrymple). Brass mentions a range of 250,000 up to 1.5 million but suggests that a lower number may be more accurate (*Forms* 17).

2 The decline in violence has also been attributed to the assassination of Gandhi in 1948 by an extremist, a "watershed moment for India" which "put an end to the murdering frenzy and to mass violence" (Graff and Galonnier, "Hindu-Muslim I" 2).

3 See Graff and Galonnier, "Hindu-Muslim I" 7. The overall number of causalities of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims (dead and injured) in India is estimated by Wilkinson at about 40,000 for the period between 1950 and 1995 (7). Nevertheless, some

cidents and a general increase in tensions, as Hindu majoritarianism became a dominant force in politics, othering members of minority communities.

Three outbreaks of communal violence have been particularly significant since the 1980s. In 1984, violence against Sikhs broke out in Delhi, after the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. The violence has been called "India's most horrific religious carnage since Partition" (Mitta). When widespread riots between Hindus and Muslims followed the tearing down of a mosque by Hindu nationalists in 1992, commentators referred to the violence as "the worst religious clashes since the nation's bloody partition of British India" (S. Sinha and Suppes). After (retaliatory) outbreaks of violence against the Muslim minority following the death of Hindu pilgrims in a fire in Gujarat in the year 2002, yet again the violence was described as "the worst outbreak of communal violence since independence" (Tudor 121).

Partition appears as a foundational trauma of the postcolonial Indian state and remains a painful part of India's history until today. In their reference to partition, the descriptions of the abovementioned incidents of 1984, 1992 and 2002 point to the magnitude of these events. They show how communalism and the legacy of the partition still affects relationships between different religious groups living together in India, particularly Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus. While none of the outbreaks of violence were as devastating as the partition violence in terms of the number of people killed, injured and displaced, these more recent ones are accompanied by their own traumas.

More than seven decades and two generations after the partition of the subcontinent, communal violence is therefore still a widespread phenomenon. The Nehruvian vision of India as a secular nation that is home to a plural and diverse people made up of many religions and cultures living together peacefully – the idea of 'unity in diversity' – has been challenged and put into question in independent India by these events again and again.

The partition of the subcontinent into the states of India and Pakistan has been depicted in many works of fiction and received considerable attention by literary critics. While it continues to play a prominent role in a number of contemporary Indian novels, outbreaks of post-partition communal violence – in particular, the three events mentioned above – have more recently found their way into Indian English fiction as well. The present study is therefore located in the context of the growing body of fiction that takes post-partition communal violence as its subject.

What does it mean for a secular nation such as India – proudly calling itself the largest democracy in the world – when citizens are targeted due to their religious identity? What are the implications for India's national identity, for relationships between

argue that "exaggerated notions of their number"– in relation to the scale of the Indian population – paint a wrong picture concerning its actual significance (*Modern Review* qtd. in ibid.). In addition to deaths and injuries, however, "riots have also inflicted a massive human cost by forcing people to leave their destroyed or endangered homes, businesses, and land" as well as having lasting political and social – and not least economic – costs also to those not directly affected by an outbreak of violence (ibid.).