Affect and the Performative Dimension of Fear in the Indian English Novel

Affect and the Performative Dimension of Fear in the Indian English Novel:

Tumults of the Imagination

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Illusion is the most tenacious weed in the collective consciousness; history teaches, but it has no pupils.
—*Antonio Gramsci*

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INTRODUCTION

FEAR AND THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF IDENTITY, AN AFFECTIVE APPROACH

This volume aims to trace how sentiments of fear related to episodes of ethnic, religious and gender violence contributed to influence the formation of the social and political landscape in India and, less prominently, Pakistan. Offering an overview of three major south-Asian literary works, each set against its respective historical and political backdrop, the present study intends to analyse the different cultural manifestations with which fear spread through the circulation of information and cultural images, thus participating in the formation of the Indian political landscape. Significant literary representations of violence in India will be read to put socio-historical events in a meaningful relation with varying degrees of fear. In fact, an important contribution to the emergence of the Indian public sphere seems to be given by the overlapping of dynamic spaces in which violence-related events and emotions are absorbed and propagated through narrations of nationality, religious affiliation and sexuality embedded in the complex interlocking between literature and media.

These considerations demand prudence when trying to deal with the complex cultural and political framework of the Indian subcontinent and neighbouring areas. While it must be acknowledged, as political theorist Sunil Khilnani[1] notes, that the birth of India's democracy could be considered the third greatest democratic achievement in importance after the French and American revolutions (it represented an endeavour requiring considerable effort and energies, in light of the tremendous human scale and diversity of people inhabiting the region), it is also true that intertwining historical events have transformed the subcontinent into an ants' nest of swarming identitarian claims which defy any possible grid mapping or binary oppositions. In the course of the centuries, the vast

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[1] Sunil Khilnani and Sudipta Kaviraj, *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

majority of an already abundant population has been crossed by an incalculable number of intestine ideological, cultural, social, economic, religious boundaries or marking stigmatisations. All sorts of litigations over language, nation and nationality, autonomist demands, caste and religious belongings brought about a history of insecurity and resentment whose "wounded attachments", to borrow an expression by philosopher Wendy Brown on political memory,[2] made fear and hatred a diffused quality in the process of subject formation in the region. Fear, it will be argued, is thus not only one of the most ancient and powerful emotions the human body is engineered to feel, but, as Edward Said noted,[3] it is also deeply bound with language as one of the most potent instruments of reality creation, one which appears to be especially positioned to incite and justify direct or indirect violent action against the other.

This aspect of Said's critical endeavour has often receded into the background compared to other insights of his, above all his decisive contribution to the widening and consequent redefining of the boundaries of what was traditionally considered the "canon" of English literature. By finding new areas of inquiry in the works of literatures considered as "other" with respect to English, Said's reflections gave an almost violent push to the then emergent theoretical and methodological approaches controversially referred to as post-structuralist and post-colonial criticism. The latter is especially relevant here, since the heritage of English colonial domination also interacts with the kaleidoscopic framework of identitarian clusters and subjectivities waveringly coexisting in the region.

The two scholars mainly responsible for its affirmation were Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri C. Spivak. They also shook off the rigidity of most studies in English literature by embracing the methodological flexibility which started to attract more and more scholarly energies after the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. Bhabha, gained prominence within academia with his 1984 essay, published in a special issue of *October*,[4] in which he commented on the ambivalence of colonial discourse by using Lacanian psychoanalysis. As for Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?",[5] she asks if the subaltern, a term which was

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[2] Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments: Late Modern Oppositional Political Formations," *Political Theory*, 21.3 (August 1993), 390-410.
[3] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003 [1978]), xvi.
[4] A journal on visual arts with a strong emphasis on post-structuralist interpretative tools.
[5] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Rosalind C. Morris, ed., *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2010).

originally used to refer to subordinate officers in the British army and later to native administrators in India, can ever articulate her or his own discourse outside or independently of the language mastered by whomever is in power in any given moment.

These two mainstays in literary criticism highlighted the importance of the context surrounding literary communication, and the focus, coherently with the post-structuralist framework behind them, is firmly set on psychological aspects involved in the "construction" or even "invention" of the Other. This book, however, tries to widen this theoretical heritage with an "affective" dimension which takes into account how bodies actually feel and react to other bodies and the spreading of cultural information. To further clarify this point, however, an introductory clarification of the theoretical proposition adopted here towards questions pertaining to identity is first necessary. For practical purposes, as a metaphorical starting point, I would like to refer to French psychoanalyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan's observation that all human relationships[6] are structured by a pre-established human order of identification. Lacan called this the "Symbolic", and its only actualisation occurs through language.[7] In Lacan's view, the Symbolic, working in tension with the Imaginary and the Real (the other two fundamental registers of identity), is constituted by a canvas of symbols, or signifiers, whose enveloping grasp is so overreaching as to wrap human existence from before birth to death and even beyond, taking hold "in even the deepest recesses of the human organism".[8] The importance of the temporal network tracing signifiers' evolution, as well as their chains of ties and connections, is such that Lacan goes to great lengths to demonstrate the function of the "itinerary" of the signifier in constituting a subject with his insightful analysis of a tale by Edgar Allan Poe which Baudelaire translated into French as "La lettre volée" ("The purloined letter").

Considering the pre-structured framework which allows the constitution of identity, French philosopher Jacques Derrida points out a fundamental inconsistency in the functioning of discourses.[6] Derrida does so by proposing a very simple example drawn from the United States Declaration of Independence:

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[6] Including those regulating the self and the other.

[7] Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on the Purloined Letter," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 11.

[8] Jacques Derrida, "Declarations of Independence", trans. by Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper, *New Political Science*, no. 7.1 (Summer 1986), 7-15, 10.

> We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States Of America, ... do,
> in the Name ... of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly ... Declare,
> That these United Colonies are ... Free And Independent States;

Derrida highlights a blind spot in the discourse produced by the text, namely that the "we" which opens or seems to precede the declaration of independence is performatively produced by that "declare" which, by transforming the English colonies into free and independent states, allows the initial "we" to identify the representatives of those states and speak in their name. For this reason, Derrida concludes, "the signature invents the signer".[9] Derrida proposes this example to underline the importance of deconstruction as a revealing moment of those grey areas which allow discourses to function in spite of and, on the contrary, precisely by virtue of such paradoxes in their temporal progression.

Building on this semantic short circuit in the progression of discourses, Judith Butler[10] observes that one is confronted with a paradox lying at the heart of a constituted subject's recognition of any given label (be it national, ethnic or religious): the fact that its agency and power are dependent on the subjection to the rules of systems of power which make and let the subject operate within any of those given systems. Being a subject means to find oneself *toujours-déjà-sujet*,[11] that is being always-already subjected by and to power so as to be recognizable by it. In her words: "subjection signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject".[12] Yet, to be fully effective, such dependence must not be recognised by the subjects themselves. In fact, if subjects are aware of the arbitrariness of their power, he or she can put its rules into question, or propose to change them.

> We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the
> outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower
> order. This is surely a fair description of part of what power does. But if,
> following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as

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[9] Ivi.

[10] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[11] The expression was used by Louis Althusser in Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002, second edition). It later inspired other intellectuals such as Ricoeur's vision of narrative in Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984 [1983]).

[12] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 2.

providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are.[13]

Whether by interpellation, in Louis Althusser's[14] sense, or by discursive productivity, in Michel Foucault's,[15] subjects are initiated through a primary submission to power while, and this is a critical condition, being deluded to be in a position of illusory sovereignty. In Butler's view, identity is a basically metaleptic process, whereby an effect is turned into an element or quality of its causation. In literary theory, the term "metalepsis" is employed to describe the narrative confusion deriving from a violation of narrative boundaries (Hamlet watching a representation of *Hamlet*, for example), a circumstance which complicates the interrelation between reality and fiction. In Foucault's and Butler's view, it refers to the masking process by which the statements and interests of a cultural layer are surreptitiously inscribed in the discourses uniting its subjects.

Similarly, the process leading to identitarian formation makes one question any essentialist or instrumental view of the relation between a subject and "his" or "her" language. Butler delves even deeper into the ontological collapse highlighted by the last point: since an identified subject represents the turning back of power upon itself, she proposes that the very existence of a subject is called into question. This phantasmatic condition is described by Butler through the metaphor of the turn:

> The paradox of subjection implies a paradox of referentiality: namely, that we must refer to what does not yet exist. Through a figure that marks the suspension of our ontological commitments, we seek to account for how the subject comes to be. That this figure is itself a "turn" is, rhetorically, performatively spectacular; "turn" translates the Greek sense of "trope." Thus the trope of the turn both indicates and exemplifies the tropological status of the gesture.[16]

Identification is a fundamental subjection to rules of the systems of power which let the subject operate in those very systems, under the false

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[13] Ivi.

[14] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002, second edition).

[15] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

[16] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 4.

impression of being the source and holder of power, Butler's conception of a performative subject is emphatically anti-sovereign in that a subject cannot exist outside the matrices of power. For Butler, no "I" precedes an act, be it linguistic or physical. In fact, Butler draws on Derrida's insight that the performative force is a function of "citationality"[17] to maintain that: "Indeed, is iterability or citationality not precisely this: the operation of that metalepsis by which the subject who 'cites' the performative is temporarily produced as the belated and fictive origin of the performative itself?"[18]

If the subject's autonomy and agency are thus dependent on prior identification in a system of shared conventions and beliefs, Benedict Anderson[19] proposes that, as long as such a system encompasses a social group, even communities as large as a nation can be said to be fundamentally "imagined", in that a nation's existence is founded not on objective criteria, but on the shared heritage by which a number of people "feel" united by common bonds. These can be historical, cultural and, of course, linguistic. Mindful of Ferdinand de Saussurre's observation about the conventionality of linguistic signs,[20] the arbitrariness of individual and collective identity represents its underlying fragility and, at the same time, its utmost strength. As long as a sufficient number of people sanction its existence, one cannot objectively contest the legitimacy of any identitarian marker or designation, unless a stronger social group objects to the contrary, putting forward its reasons either diplomatically or by force.

This leads us to a second main point deriving from the theoretical assumptions made so far. The solidity of identity strictly requires the presence of an Other from which a given subjectivity differentiates itself. More generally, if any identitarian claim is dependent on the primary recognition of those identifying with it, rather than on its intrinsic qualities, such original identification in turn brings with it a second *reconnaisance* of those said to possess a different identity or cultural belonging. Becoming a subject implies thus a double process of subjection: one to a shared heritage, and one to the discourse of the Other. It is in this sense that both Lacan and Butler, carrying on Sigmund Freud's lesson,

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[17] Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context", in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

[18] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Routledge: New York & London, 1997), 49.

[19] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 2006 [1983]).

[20] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

maintained that a subject is always bonded in discourse to the intersubjective Other:[21] "one comes to 'exist' by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other. One 'exists' not only by virtue of being recognized, but, in a prior sense, by being recognizable".[22] This helps to explain the observation by the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha that popular rebellions are often ignited at their most subversive by prompting identification in opposing or antagonistic cultural practices.[23]

As a consequence, when dealing with the question of violence perpetrated by any given social group toward another (or each other), the troubling process of identitarian formation and juxtaposition does not appear to allow any possible categorisation. While all subjective formations apply qualifying labels to their own or another's actions, the power of identitarian subjugation hides from each party involved the fact that they are bound to one another by the same linguistic, constitutive process. Disparaging labels such as "evil", for example, are misleading because evil does not announce or present itself as such; it is the Other's discourse proclaiming it so. The linguistic process, by hiding its constitutive power in the background, allows the subject to make such claims in the illusion that he or she is simply stating a matter of fact. The stronger this process of overlapping of layers, the more subtle, sophisticated, and above all invisible are the devices through which each subjective label will try to reinforce itself in self-assurance.

If much of cultural and postcolonial criticism has focused on the production of discourse as an inherent power of narration, it is due precisely to a growing preoccupation in the way it weaves identities and cultural representations in tense oppositions. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), for example, has provided a masterful overview of the normative effects of "Western" narration, with its power to construct and subsequently confine representations of the East in a series of stereotypes, both reassuring and menacing, which made the West vacillate between its "contempt for what [was] familiar and [shiver] of delight in—or fear of— novelty".[24] Western subjects "experienced" the oriental Other through discursive lenses such as rumours, anecdotes, and stereotypical stories which magnified imaginative geographies whose boundaries, defined

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[21] Sandra Adell, *Double-consciousness/double Bind: Theoretical Issues in Twentieth-century Black Literature* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 61.
[22] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 5.
[23] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory", *New Formations*, n. 5 (Summer 1988), 5-23, 6.
[24] Said, *Orientalism*, 59.

through language and vocabulary, shaped "the language, perception, and form of the encounter between East and West".[25] In a preface to a later edition of the book, Said notes that the fundamental binarism of self and Other lacks any kind of ontological stability, to be the evanescent product of not just the identification of an Other, but of "human effort"[26] as well. While much of the cultural criticism of the late twentieth-century has mainly focused on the former, it must not be forgotten that Said insisted on the relevance of the combination of the two. As Said himself points out, the "supreme fictions" conveyed through discourse "lend themselves easily to manipulation and the organization of collective passion [through] the mobilizations of fear, hatred, disgust and resurgent self-pride and arrogance".[27]

This leads us to consider an additional consequence of the identitarian epistemological paradigm adopted here, a condition which is deeply discussed by Butler in her *Excitable Speech*. In this groundbreaking work, the scholar considers a disquieting side effect of the intersubjective bond as it has been described so far: the fact that being called or defined in a certain way unconsciously generates a "fear of death and the question of whether or not one will survive".[28] Butler is adamant in maintaining that any linguistic address cannot but produce a feeling of fear:

> The terms that facilitate recognition are themselves conventional, the effects and instruments of a social ritual that decide, often through exclusion and violence, the linguistic conditions of survivable subjects. If language can sustain the body, it can also threaten its existence. Thus, the question of the specific ways that language threatens violence seems bound up with the primary dependency that any speaking being has by virtue of the interpellative or constitutive address of the other.[29]

Linguistic interpellation or labelling contains and brings with it the unconscious reminder of the void and inconsistency on which subjectivity is founded, and the fact that while interpellation of the Other brings a subject into existence through language, by that same power it always threatens the subject's very existence, such that "to be called a name is one of the first forms on linguistic injury that one learns".[30]

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[25] Ivi.
[26] Ibidem, xvi.
[27] Ivi.
[28] Ivi.
[29] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 5-6.
[30] Ibid., 2.

This allows us to return to the affective methodological inflection mentioned earlier. Indeed, theoretically fear is being referred here after Brian Massumi's fundamental distinction between affect and emotion.[31] The latter is seen as a "qualified intensity", that is a qualitative dimension of experience which is fixed or congealed through sociocultural operation, and later appropriated by the subject as something personal.[32] On the contrary, affect refers to pre-subjective, non-representational and non-rational forces which too often pass as an unacknowledged component in cultural communication. The importance of considering the affective dimension of fear is well summarised by Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg when they note that "visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing ... can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension".[33] Taking the affective dimension of fear may thus prove helpful in formulating a hypothesis on those factors participating in cultural processes which actually drive people to act and participate in episodes of violence related to identitarian paradigms such as nationality, religious affiliation or gender roles; or which, more generally, produce any kind of somatic responses by taking hold of the body within and beyond the grasp of discursive structures or constructions to include Guattarian "existential territories"[34] of subjectivity, that is the semiotic (re)production of perceptions and images about the Other which "technological machines of information and communication"[35] spread in the mental geography of a given social group in order to "operate at the heart of human subjectivity, not only within its memory and intelligence, but within its sensibility, affects and unconscious fantasms".[36] The heterogeneity of the factors participating in the consolidation of subjectivity,

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[31] Drawing on his reading of Gilles Deleuze, who was in his turn inspired by the work of Baruch Spinoza. See Brian Massumi, *A Shock to Thought: Expression After Deleuze and Guattari* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002); Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2011).

[32] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002), 28.

[33] Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[34] Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Aethico-aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. by Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995). Originally published as *Chaosmose*, Éditions Galilée, 4.

[35] Ivi.

[36] Ivi.

as Félix Guattari noted, are partly semiological (as they appear in education, religion, art, and so on), partly constructed by the media industry, and lastly by asignifying fields of meaning whose effects escape linguistic paradigms. The bringing of fear into the equation complicates thus the reflection of narrative and historical events with an attention to the biological processes which come into play with cultural and linguistic facts.

While many scholarly studies have dealt with the plague of public and domestic violence in India, the lack of solid data on riots and murderous attacks, on the one side, and the unpredictable conditions of their occurring, on the other, have made it difficult to distinguish conclusively those factors through which violence erupts and its influence on cultural and political life in India. From this perspective, literature, may offer a significant contribution to the sketching of a sort of "affectionscape" to register how emotions connected with fear are interweaved with questions of nationality, ethnicity, religious affiliation, class, social status, and gender. In their reflections on the ability of literature to represent a political site of social interaction for the constitution of public opinion Rossella Ciocca and Neelam Srivastava have already recognised the importance of affects and emotions in the constitution of public opinion.[37] This is in contrast, for example, to the extremely rational model proposed by Jürgen Habermas to describe the processes involved in the interaction of consolidated and emerging identities in the public sphere, though it must not be forgotten that Habermas himself had already acknowledged the role played by events experienced by personal, everyday lives in how they are expressed in literary accounts.[38]

   Of course, in dealing with composite and variegated groups, other aspects typically associated with the social come to play a role. This kind of reference to the biological or lived dimensions of South Asia moves from Tiziana Terranova's[39] individuation, following Michel Foucault's[40]

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[37] Rossella Ciocca and Neelam Srivastava, eds., *Indian Literature and the World: Multilingualism, Translation, and the Public Sphere* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
[38] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1989).
[39] Tiziana Terranova, "Futurepublic: On Information Warfare, Bio-racism and Hegemony as Noopolitics", in *Theory, Culture and Society*, no. 24.3 (Sage Publications, 2007), 125-145.

lectures at the Collège de France, of the biopolitical element of the population as opposed to the notion of civil society. In this model, peoples are considered in their biological and economic aspects as cultural elements that are produced, consumed, felt and acted upon. Moreover, even theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, most frequently attacked for entrenching their reflections about postcolonial cultures in the obscurity of post-structuralist abstractness, have proven mindful of the importance of phenomenology when considering subalternity as a space of difference, thanks to their interest in the affective economies theorised by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

For all these reasons, it is not the aim of this work to try and expose guilty parties or single out culprits, nor to attempt to place the blame on anybody for the violence henceforth described on South Asian soil. If an objective may be said to guide the considerations articulated in the following pages, it may only be the willingness to contribute to a higher level of awareness about the cultural *dispositifs* through which violence related to identitarian claims is perpetrated, and doing so by registering the invisible interaction of affective and symbolic dimensions in literary and social space.

The following analysis considers the cultural and ideological devices through which a community or social group legitimises and claims for itself the right to kill or prevail over others, and it does so with the awareness that any group, be it violent or not, acts in the interest of what it considers a greater good independently of the gravity and cruelty of the abuses committed. In fact, different degrees of physical or psychological violence are commonly performed with the prevailing subjects or parties not even seeing themselves as killers or offenders, making the violence perpetrated pass as something rightful and legitimate.

The volume is divided into three chapters, each composed of four parts. The first chapter focuses on Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) to discuss how the spreading of rumours during Partition, appealing to emotional states such as fear and resentment, seems to have been able to cause a temporal short-circuit in which the stigmatisation of the Other reopened deep cultural wounds. These, in turn, triggered networks of collective mobilisation which legitimised the recourse to violence even towards previously trusted communities and individuals.

The second chapter considers Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* (2014) to delve into the palimpsestic overlapping of different layers of

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[40] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, trans. by Graham Burchell, ed. by Michael Senellart (Basingstoke: Houndmills, 2005).

power during the decades immediately following Partition. More specifically, following the military manoeuvres which the newborn Indian nation authorised to stifle the separatist movements which had gained momentum with the process of decolonisation of the subcontinent, especially the Naxalite one, it will be argued that the "backward", rural areas of the northern part of India represented an internal front of paranoiac projections for the budding Indian bourgeoisie during the uncertain years of India's capitalistic growth and affirmation as a military power on the international scene.

Finally, the third chapter offers a critical account of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) to read the Indian Emergency of 1975-76 as a hiatus in the development of a nation which suddenly found that it had somehow "outgrown" itself. The need to reduce its population and "become beautiful" revealed the immaturity of Indian democratic institutions, whose predatory nature still thrived on the contradictions of a historical heritage made of caste prejudices and abuses.

CHAPTER ONE

ANXIETY:
RUMOUR AND THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION
OF HATRED IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S
TRAIN TO PAKISTAN

> The question of the degree to which
> life even requires the service of
> history is one of the most important
> questions and concerns with regard
> to the well-being of a man, a people,
> or a culture. For with a certain excess
> of history, life crumbles and
> degenerates, and, finally,
> so does history itself.
> —Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and*
> *Abuse of History*

1.1 The enemy within

Arjun Appadurai[1] distinguishes between two dominant scholarly approaches in the present state of the investigation about how different forms of uncertainty and fear affect religious affiliations and ethnic identity in India. The first one focuses on those forms of knowledge spreading ethnic violence as an expression of collective anger. Among them are memory, prejudice, rumour and propaganda. These are strictly related to heightened convictions, tenets and dogmas "capable of producing inhumane degrees of violence".[2] The other focuses on doubt,

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[1] Arjun Appadurai, "Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization", *Development and Change*, Vol. 29 (1998), 915-925. Reprinted from *Public Culture*, no. 10.2 (Winter 1998).
[2] Ibid., 905.

uncertainty, and indeterminacy as developed in the work of Émile Durkheim[3] on anomie, Piotr Hoffman[4] on doubt, time, and violence, and Georg Simmel,[5] Zygmunt Bauman[6] (1997) and Julia Kristeva concerning ideas about the stranger.[7] All of these will be discussed in the following analysis in trying to look for those narrative units, akin to what Fredric Jameson (1981) has called "ideologemes",[8] which traverse Indian social reality at a symbolic-unconscious level, while simultaneously engaging each individual subject on bodily and libidinal planes. As Jameson notes, while "ideology necessarily implies the libidinal investment of the individual subject",[9] ideology itself requires narratives that must be lived socially as a kind of collective fantasy or daydreaming. That is why ideologemes are never given in verbal form, but must be reconstructed by the extraction of the inherited paradigms and narrative devices present in literary narrations as they free-float among the raw materials of historical events and data.

Rumour is the first one being analysed here. It will be used to discuss the troubling notion that the formation of subjective aspirations of an ethnic group comes about with dreams, fantasies, and assumptions about the known and neighbouring Other. Perceptions about the Other can concern not only a distant and never-seen-before people located in an unknown fantasized land, but people one sees every day. That is, they can be based on what is actually experiential and observable through direct contact and experience, not just on pure imagination.

From this perspective, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) is an exemplary novel which describes the brutality of violence arising between different ethnic groups living side by side. Singh, however, does not focus on communities which are fierce enemies, but on groups which have actually been on good terms with each other for centuries. In fact, what Singh describes is the decline of relationships which go from

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[3] Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951).

[4] Piotr Hoffman, *Doubt, Time, Violence* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and *Violence in Modern Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[5] Georg Simmel, "The Stranger", in Kurt H. Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950), 402-408.

[6] Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

[7] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

[8] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

[9] Ibid., 185.

brotherhood to suspicion, and then rapidly drift to violence and the right to take the other's life.

The following reflection starts by trying to understand how enmity and an extreme degree of group violence become possible among people who had decades or even centuries of peaceful coexistence, people who were previously social intimates. If Said revealed the Orient "to be a representational chimera, a fantastical image projected from the Occident",[10] here it will be discussed how similar subjective formations can pertain to a close other, for example somebody one spends time with in everyday relationships. With rumour, even long-time friends can suddenly come to forget who the other actually is, on the basis of direct contact and experience, to end up seeing him or her as someone completely different, an enemy to be killed.

Indian daily news confirms how this aspect makes the novel still extremely topical. In the village of Bisara (Uttar Pradesh), about 50 kilometres from New Delhi, Muslims and Hindus have enjoyed long-standing peaceful relations. Betwa Sharma, writing for the *Huffington Post* online, reports[11] that Hindus generously conceded land for the construction of a local mosque. Festivals have always been joyously celebrated in mutual participation. Even during the ghastly days of Partition between India and Pakistan, in August 1947, the village reportedly did not know the gruesome brutality of communal hatred and rivalry. In a region to this day plagued with religious and ethnic violence, Bisara was always seen as an exemplary oasis of peace and mutual harmony.

So, when the door of his house was abruptly kicked down, on the night of Monday 28 September 2015, Mohammad Akhlaq could hardly have imagined that he would be dragged out of his residence to be fiercely beaten with sticks and stoned to an ignominious death by his fellow villagers. A Muslim ironsmith, he did not even suspect that, just an hour before, he had been found guilty of eating beef by a Hindu priest of a local temple. Around the preacher stood a crowd which had gathered there after a series of Whatsapp messages among villagers had rapidly spread the rumour that Akhlaq and his family had killed and eaten a cow, a sacred animal in the Hindu religion, which had been missing from the neighbourhood for some time.[12] The countdown towards Akhlaq's death

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[10] Stephen Cairns, "The Stone Books of Orientalism", in P. Scriver and V. Prakash, eds., *Colonial Modernities: Building, Dwelling and Architecture in British India and Ceylon* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), 52.

[11]   http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2016/06/17/the-lynching-of-mohammad-_n_10519768.html.

[12] http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2015/09/30/beef-killing-up_n_8219828.html.

had thus inexorably started. The presence of meat in Akhlaq's refrigerator, which the family desperately claimed to be mutton, was all the proof that was required for the suspicion to turn into confirmation.

The police reportedly seized some of the meat to test if it was cow or goat. Asaduddin Owaisi, leader of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul Muslimeen party, criticised the scrutiny, stating that it bore no relevance to the legitimacy of Akhlaq's lynching. After reports seemingly confirmed that it was cow, some of the villagers demanded the release of those who, among them, had been arrested for having participated in Akhlaq's execution, and that Akhlaq's family be put in jail in their stead. The family had been living in Bisara for no less than seventy years and was well-known there.

While people in Bisara have tried to explain Akhlaq's tragic demise as a fundamental accident, the unpredictable outcome of a youth both angry and uncontrollable, many more complex layers of meaning seem to be hiding in this disconcerting story. Bisara had reportedly always seen its inhabitants relate on friendly terms, despite ethnic and religious differences, yet somehow the simple possibility of a Muslim eating beef was sufficient to create a special circumstance of uncertainty capable, to use Arjun Appadurai's terminology in "Dead Certainty", of rapidly precipitating the ethnic body into frameworks of identity and categories which supported and legitimated communal violence.[13]

The apparent contradiction at the heart of this shady incident raises cogent questions on the subject of communal and religious violence in India. More specifically, the resentment which prompted a significant part of Bisara village to act as they did may be considered as a clue for a deeper feeling of fear which, and this is the main contention of the present analysis, greatly contributed to the formation of subjectivities and their ethnic or religious affiliation in Indian public spaces.

1.2 Rumour in *Train to Pakistan*

Mano Majra, the fictional hamlet in which *Train to Pakistan* (1956) is set, has many things in common with Bisara. It is a tiny village situated on the Indian border, half a mile away from the river Sutlej, with about seventy families of mainly Sikh and Muslim religions and only one Hindu family, Lala Ram Lal's.

The first section of the novel, "Dacoity", highlights the calmness and peaceful life of the village. Mano Majra is described as an oasis which had

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[13] Appadurai, "Dead Certainty".

not yet been consumed by the flames of communal hatred ignited by Partition, which were already spreading throughout the subcontinent. Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus all lived in peaceful coexistence and had been doing so for centuries.

The late coming of violence was possible because life there was characterised by indifference towards independence, even though it was the most important political event of the time. For a period, villagers even ignored the fact that the British had left the region and that the country itself was being divided in two. In this respect, Mano Majra (which originally gave the title to the novel)[14] seems almost to reflect Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's notion of "unity in diversity"[15] that he considered an essential trait of Indian culture. What mattered, to the villagers, was solidarity among them, the defence of mutual trust, and being faithful to their roots:

> For them truth, honour, financial integrity were "all right", but these were placed lower down the scale of values than being true to one's salt, to one's friend and fellow villagers.[16]

The novel's main point of interest for the present reflection consists precisely in its ability to describe how the seeds of fundamentalist communalism and violent reprisal, tacitly encouraged by government forces, unsettled the peace and collective harmony in the village.

It is not by chance that Singh accompanies the quietness of the village with a characteristic reference to climate. The author makes a meteorological reference to how the summer of 1947, rainless and plagued by scorching heat, was different from the others. Singh recreates an ominous atmosphere, where nature seems imbued with almost supernatural elements watching over the life of humans and judging it:

> The summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers. Even the weather had a different feel in India that year. It was hotter than usual, and drier and dustier. And the summer was longer. No one could remember when the monsoon had been so late. For weeks, the sparse clouds cast only

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[14] K. V. Surendran, *Indian Writing: Critical Perspectives* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2000), 74.
[15] Twinkle B. Manavar, "The Theme of Partition in Kushwant Singh's Novel *Train to Pakistan*", in Jaydipsinh Dodiya, ed., *Contemporary Indian Writings in English* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001).
[16] Khushwant Singh, *Train to Pakistan* (Gurgaon: Penguin Books India, 2016 [1956]), 54. The version of the book from which all the quotes presented in this chapter are taken is the electronic one available on Google Play.

shadows. There was no rain. People began to say that God was punishing them for their sins. Some of them had good reason to feel that they had sinned. (1)

Singh points out that in the summer of 1947 the monsoon broke late and, when it did, the northern part of India was in terror or hiding. Before that, the month of August had been exceedingly hot and dry, a meteorological equivalent of the heat and mass murdering ignited by "reports of the proposed division of the country into a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan" (1). The violent manifestation of the monsoon becomes a symbol due to the sinister calmness registered in the beginning of the novel: just as the month preceding Partition had been unusually quiet and still, so in the village nothing happens in dreary anticipation of the violence which was about to brutally explode with lasting effects. The intensification of nature seems to proceed together with the escalation of Partition; the two movements are caught together by narration. The indifference to Partition which seems to characterise the novel is thus only apparent, the coming of that political event is sinisterly forewarned by "the winds of destruction ... blowing across the land" (42), an effective way to render the catalytic alteration which Partition brought to rural people in the country. From this perspective, the different moods in which nature is described (through references to rain, summer, and monsoon flood) all serve a purpose in the novel, creating a parallelism with Indian politics, and thus question its dualistic aspect: the events of nature are awaited and desired, even though their consequences are far from beneficial. Similarly, the coming of independence had been cherished in anticipation, yet its coming did demand a tragic death toll.[17]

Hukum Chand, the deputy commissioner and local magistrate of the district to which Mano Majra belongs, counterposes "the cropses sizzling and smoking" (79) to the pattering of rain which was much awaited and desired, enthusiastically acclaimed by peasants, but whose coming is bound to bring damage of catastrophic proportions: "Rain: at long last the rain, thought the magistrate... It smelled good, it sounded good, it looked good and above all it did good. Ah, but did it?" (79) Also, the word "cropses" is a reference which also ominously seems to anticipate the burning of corpses in the ghost train which will be carried out later in the novel. Political freedom brought joy, but also sorrow and blood to the people. Soon, Partition would begin to take its toll in Mano Majra as well.

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[17] Dr. Chhote Lal Khatri, "Trauma of Partition in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*", in Gajendra Kumar and Uday Shankar Ojha, eds., *Indian English Fiction: Readings and Reflections* (New Delhi: Sarhup and Sons, 2003), 40.

The calmness of climate contrasts with the situation of religious and political hatred surrounding the village which had been mounting in the years preceding 1947.

Singh's narrative proves sensitive to the fact that while events like Partition and communal violence are certainly political and historical circumstances, they cannot be fully understood or described without taking into account the materiality of the world in which they occur, or, in the words of Upamanyu Mukherjee trying to define the meaning of a "postcolonial environment", "the complex (and often conflict-ridden) web, field, or system—whatever we choose to call it—composed of the relationships between human and non-human agents".[18]

To describe how relations between Sikhs and Muslims quickly deteriorated, Singh highlights two peculiar aspects at the origin of the violence surrounding the village. First, Singh dwells on the fact that rumours of unjustly received acts of violence were justification enough for a community to get its own revenge and carry out an assault on the supposedly offending one. It was rumours spreading uncontrollably among different communities which ignited and justified war:

> Rumours of atrocities committed by Sikhs on Muslims in Patiala, Ambala and Kapurthala began to spread. They had heard of gentlewomen having their veils taken off, being stripped and marched down crowded streets to be raped in the market place. Many had eluded their would-be ravishers by killing themselves. They had heard of mosques being desecrated by the slaughter of pigs on the premises, and of copies of the holy Koran being torn up by infidels. (102)

Secondly, when Singh makes reference to the riots that had been spreading around Calcutta, he makes sure to inform the reader that such violence had been spurred by reports of the proposed Partition between India and Pakistan. That is, the simple suggestion of a division of the population on religious grounds was enough for the eruption of violence.

> The summer before, communal riots, precipitated by reports of the proposed division of the country into a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan, had broken out in Calcutta, and within a few months the death toll had mounted to several thousand. Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame.

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[18] Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5.

> The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped. (1)

Singh proves his awareness of the impact that rumour had played and was playing in the development of historical affairs in India. However, before discussing what kind of complicities and anticipations may come into play between rumour and ethnic hatred and uncertainty, a historical digression is needed first. It is, in fact, vital to try and delineate how Singh's reference to rumour intercepts its haunting presence in Indian social imaginary in a historical frame which, for the sake of this argument, we will limit to the ninety years that led to India's independence from Britain.

1.3 The avenging machine: the historical echo of rumour

The period spans almost a century and begins with the Great Indian Mutiny of 1857. On Sunday, 10th May 1857, native troops of the British army in India, also known as sepoys,[19] whose number was about tenfold compared to British soldiers at the time, rebelled against the coloniser for religious reasons. The cause was the introduction of the new and more efficient Enfield rifle which, to be loaded, required the biting of greased cartridges that the soldiers suspected were covered with fat either from the cow or pig. The former represented a sacred animal for Hindus, who saw in this a first attempt at a forced conversion to Christianity. The latter was seen as unclean by Muslims, who thus felt no less offended than the Hindus. The rebellion lasted until April 1859 and tested British power to the extreme. India was almost lost because of it. The Sepoy Mutiny represented the first major revolt against the British colonisers, and it was followed by more outbreaks fuelling Indian nationalism.

What is relevant here is the fact that while the British saw this rebellion as coming completely out of the blue, owing in part to their ignorance and fundamental disinterest in local religious customs, its unprecedented strength derived not from the religious affront *per se*, but from a rumour. The voice had spread fast, among rebels throughout India that the British were actually attempting to subvert the religion of Hindus and Muslims. The suspicion that the British may be surreptitiously trying to damage Hindus and Muslims through their respective religions, nurtured a resentment that was so strong as to sustain violent uprisings

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[19] The East India Company had started recruiting among natives since 1667, while the British government started training Indians to fight with their weapons and strategies.

which lasted for about two years. Those two religious groups felt as if the British efforts were aimed at stealing their future.

What started as a spark in the army of the East India Company soon became a fire spreading throughout all of northern India. It represented the most serious threat that the Raj had faced up to that moment. At the same time, the slaughter of common people and the rape of women perpetrated by the Sepoys could not but strike the British imagination. Identifying with civilisation *tout court*, the British interpreted those acts of violence as the barbaric surge of the ignorant masses manipulated and instigated by their deceiving leaders, through the use of inventions and superstition, against the well-meaning colonisers.[20]

Even though the Sepoy rebellion was eventually crushed, it was all but worn out. The spectre of the Mutiny of 1857 continued to haunt the British long after the suppression of the revolt, producing its most formidable threat in the Partition of Bengal, at the very pinnacle of the power of the Raj. On 24th September, a forward-looking issue of *The Times* stated: "...the unrest in India is raising in many minds the foreboding of perhaps another outbreak". The iconic momentousness of 1857 and the function of rumour which had characterized it were reactivated and expanded half a century later with the Partition of Bengal. The event represented the most significant territorial fracture on the subcontinent, whose consequences can help to explain many of the dynamics regulating cultural and political relationships in South Asia.

The Partition of Bengal was officially announced by Lord Curzon, then Viceroy of India, in July 1905 and was effectively realized on 16th October 1905. With the apparent motivation of administrative convenience, Curzon exploited the discomfort of some of his officials in Bengal (about the fact that they considered the province too big) to counter the growing efforts of the Indian National Congress Party (a secularist faction which had gained prominence for its opposition to the British colonisers) to make India independent. The strategy adopted was the one of *divide et impera*, "divide and rule": quelling mounting aspirations to independence by dividing the population on religious grounds.

The resulting fragmentation would weaken opposition from each community and divert their attention from the policies of the British coloniser to the conflicts with rivalling communities. The partition of the territory would make the Muslims a majority in the eastern area of the province (thus hindering contacts between Hindu agitators in Calcutta and

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[20] Kim A. Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857: Rumours, Conspiracies and the Making of the Indian Uprising* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), xvi.

East Bengal), while the same would be true for the Hindus in the western part. The British hoped that territorial partition would result in giving religious conflict precedence over the nationalist cause. Even though, as the British had anticipated, relations between the two communities quickly deteriorated after the partition (many episodes of communal violence had occurred already in April 1906), the partition of Bengal re-ignited and radicalised nationalistic sentiments, instead of quelling them.

Again, the haunting spectre which the British had failed to acknowledge was sustained by rumours aimed at increasing malcontent towards the former colonisers, and Europeans in general, as exploiters of the country. First, the so-called "Head Scare" rumour was diffused by a Bengali pamphlet distributed in Calcutta. It stated that a sacrifice in human heads was required for the construction of a bridge near Howrah. Any person found walking in the streets after 9 p.m. would be sequestered and beheaded. Absurd as it may seem to some, the rumour was potent enough to keep workers at the mills near Howrah clear of the illusory dangers of the streets and in the perceived safety of their homes. At the same time, other baseless rumours, accepted by some local newspapers, spread the panic by maintaining that Russians were preparing to invade India, or that Bengali boys were being mysteriously kidnapped to be sent to Mauritius, the tea gardens in Assam or other places (this latter rumour was also known as the "Kidnapping Scare"). The elite classes made no effort to confute any of these rumours, counting on the fact that they would grow due to the masses of uneducated and superstitious people who would be slowly burning with hatred towards the British.[21]

The nationalistic sentiments stirred by the partition of Bengal came about in this climate of fear and diffidence created with the help of rumours. As Andrew Fraser maintains: "The discontent engendered by the[se] influences ... remained more or less latent until the announcement of the Partition of Bengal".[22] In reaction, young students took inspiration from the writings of European revolutionaries like Giuseppe Mazzini and founded secret societies, known as samitis, whose aim was to foment an internal war in order to drive the British out of the subcontinent. Bengali insurrectionist groups collaborated with subversive formations in Europe, especially with Russian anarchist Nicholas Safranski in Paris, to be trained in the manufacturing of bombs and then bring their knowledge back to the subcontinent. During the years 1908-1909 many British officials and casualties lost their lives in bombing attacks used as a political weapon.

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[21] Andrew Fraser, *Government and Politics in Bengal* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1979), 11.
[22] Ibid., 12.