



## The Recursive Spectre of Violence: Memory, Trauma and Time A Study of Waryam Singh Sandhu's "Shadows" (1998)

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### Abstract

*Is an act of violence an isolated disruption in normalcy that can be neatly cordoned off in time, or is it a far-more pervasive current of agony that exceeds any such temporal demarcation? Is it possible to characterise a traumatic incident as an "event" in the past, or does it demand an acknowledgement of how the suffering of the past lives on in the present? Set against the backdrop of the Khalistan insurgency in the Punjab of the 1980s and 1990s, Waryam Singh Sandhu's short story "Shadows" (Parchchhavein) details the rampant bloodshed of the time that also carries within itself the inevitable ring of the events of the Partition in and around 1947. In the present essay, I wish to investigate the representation of violence in "Shadows" that demands to be understood not merely as an "event" with neat temporal borders but as a constituent of the numerous and recurrent waves of violence that both constitute and disrupt the collective psyche. All along with this exploration, I focus on the strategic narrative techniques that the text employs to convey the horror of violence to the readers and the subsequent lasting impact that it leaves on its characters. By drawing upon memory as a theoretical category, I argue that memory serves a paradoxical function in the text: while the resurfacing of traumatic memories of the 1940s is painful and agonising in the face of the events of the 1980s, the amorphous nature of memory also opens up avenues where possibilities of collective catharsis and healing might lie. The curious tension between remedial hermeneutics and the recurrent surges of violence in "Shadows" ultimately resolves itself with the victory of the latter, as violence establishes itself not merely as a disruptive "event" but as the pervasive state of being in the world itself.*

**Keywords:** Recursive Violence, Memory, Trauma, Time, Waryam Singh Sandhu, *Shadows*

### I

#### Theoretical Triumvirate: Trauma, Memory and Time

"The time is out of joint; O cursèd spite, That ever I was born to set it right!"

— Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5

In this section, I briefly lay out a theoretical framework of trauma and its effects on time perception that I would later draw upon to illustrate the role of memory, temporality and



violence in the text. Let me speak of time first. The vast philosophical and scientific debates about time are too heterogenous to describe here in detail, but I take as my starting point the humble proposition that the experience of violence and trauma affects how individuals come to experience time. The focus of the present study is the psychic temporal reality of the “victims” of physical and mental violence but one may claim that the experience of time gets altered even in the mental reality of the “perpetrator”. Allow me to chart out my proposed relationship between trauma and time in some strokes.

The lasting after-effects of a violent event disrupt the ordinary past-present-future linearity of time. Instigated by emotional trauma, the memories of the *past* invade the *present* as is also exemplified by incessant flashbacks that trigger the memory to unearth the *past* often as a consequence of a “trigger” in the *present*. In this regard, the present study foregrounds an aspect of time that has always been central to its etymological history: arising from the Old Germanic *time*, “time” is cognate with “tide” and the rising and falling actions that we associate with it. As Robert D Stolorow underlines, “[e]xperiences of emotional trauma become *freeze-framed* into an eternal present in which one remains forever trapped, or to which one is condemned to be perpetually returned by life’s slings and arrows” (Stolorow 2015; italics mine). The emphasis on the *freezing* of the past is crucial as it brings to mind the narrator’s comment in “Shadows” that the horrifying murders of Hussain Baksh and his family lay embedded in their eyes as a “*frozen* snapshot of a film” (33) that he is cursed to revisit again and again: “I would scream in my dreams and wake up. I would see a surging sea of deep red blood into which jumped Balbir Singh with both his feet. And as he would walk towards me, I would scream” (36). How the narrator is destined to revisit that gory violence time and again as triggered by the events in his presence is the thematic current that, I suggest, enables us to frame our discussion around the theory of memory, time and trauma in the text.

When the average extension of time has been disrupted so horribly that *the past* can never be *the past*, the experience of time in trauma assumes a cyclical nature in which *the past* and *the present* constitute a future of their own marked by incessant repetition. One of the leading scholars of trauma studies, Cathy Caruth, underlines the same *repetition* that is the defining characteristic of trauma, that resurfaces in “the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts” along with “numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (or avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (Caruth 4). As this temporality of *the past* being repeated endlessly is starkly different from others who still are (to an extent) observing time as progressing from *past to present to future*, the victims of trauma often consider themselves helpless and passive in face of the mere repetition of time and memories. Consider the helplessness in the narrator’s response when his friends, Manohar and Pargat, are discussing their opinionated stances about the political climate: “But what could I say? Time was slipping out of my fingers and leaving its traces behind. My eyes were full of dust flying around” (33). The experience of being snatched away from the way others experience the passage of time sustains the feelings of isolation and alienation from the world that the victims of trauma face. With this theoretical



framework of trauma, memory, time and recurrence, let us go to a close engagement with the text to illustrate its reflections in Sandhu's "Shadows."

## II

### The Recurrent Haunting: Narrative, Memory and Violence

"The past is never dead. It's not even past."  
— William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, 1951.

In this section, I wish to underline the parallel between the trope of *recurrence* that finds voice in Sandhu's "Shadows": first, in the way that the story organises its narrative in which anecdotes, memories, and symbols keep *re*-appearing; and second, the way the story presents violence as being characterised by *recurrence* on a broader historical canvas, including yet exceeding the violence of 1947.

On the narrative level, "Shadows" is fascinated with the trope of repetition. Usually presented to the reader as a function of memory, the story recounts multiple events that have happened in the past already and that are repeated in the present with little change. This repetition of cyclicity in the story is allowed majorly because of the presence of an intergenerational cast of characters: the narrator's grandparents, his parents, the narrator himself, and now, his children. The incidents in the narrator's childhood are repeated in the lives of his children, constituting a cycle of events in which the *future* is just an endless repetition of the *past*. Consider the flight of the narrator's memory and the intermingling of the past with the present when he sees his children huddled up around his mother for stories: "While my mother narrated those stories to my children, I would feel as if my grandmother, wrapping me in her shawl, was telling me [stories]" (31). Elsewhere in the narrative, symbolic elements keep reappearing in different ways intergenerationally. The "*parna*" touching the earth when Fazal Haq bows down in front of Balbir Singh *re*-surfaces when the rope around Balbir Singh's neck touches the ground while he offers the narrator to climb upon his shoulders (34, 38); how Fazal Haq describes Balbir Singh to have wetted his clothes with his "pee" *re*-appears again when the narrator urinates on Balbir Singh's shoulders (34, 38). The narrative future is presented by the text as a seemingly self-conscious re-writing of the tablet of the past which disrupts the linear progression of time and causes it to just rotate cyclically (or helically, to be precise). That the story ends precisely at the moment when it begins with the "child-like question" (30, 45) asked by his youngest daughter enables the text to come full circle, collapsing the beginning and the ending with the simultaneous equivalence between the past, present and future.

Before we recount the recurrence of violence in "Shadows," much of which posits the Partition as a reference, it will be beneficial to place the argument in a scholarly context. The Partition of India constitutes such a horrifying legacy of violent murders, abductions and rapes that it continues to be a "shadow," in the literal sense of the story's title, and its trauma



continues to live on in the present. A vast critical corpus endorses this view of how Partition is alive in the living communal memory of South Asia. The historian Vazira Zamindar termed this legacy of the Partition as the “Long Partition” affirming Ayesha Jalal’s poignant comment about how 1947 is “a defining moment that is neither [a] beginning nor [an] end” (qtd. In Sengupta xii). Urvashi Butalia, the leading Partition historian, has commented that her seminal work *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) was itself catalysed by the 1984 riots in India that made her family feel that “it was partition again...we thought we had seen the worst of it during partition, yet...” (Butalia 31). Priyamvada Gopal has argued in a similar vein that the microscopic occurrences of violence such as communal riots often invoke what she calls “the trope of the Partition” (Gopal 69). I wish to take seriously the argument about the legacy and the “trope” of Partition’s violence that constitutes a blinding “shadow” in the representation of violence in Sandhu’s “Shadows.”

In the story, when the readers get to know that Manohar and his father have been killed in the “senseless” (*andhadhund*) firing, the immediate response of the text is to recount the horrifying murders of Fazal Haq, Reshma and Hussain Baksh’s child. The rampant bloodshed of the *present* moment forces the memory to revisit the horrors of the *past*. The same is true for the forced displacements that happened following the vivisection of India in 1947. When Hussain Baksh submits his possession in the narrator’s grandfather’s custody, the latter quickly dismisses the Partition to be a minor disruption: “Simpleton! This confusion won’t last long. How can anyone leave his hearth and home... You people have come back and live here” (33). Some decades later it is his Hindu friend Manohar who is contemplating leaving the village, and the narrator’s memory brings forth his grandfather’s exact words about the village being his “hearth and home” that he wishes to say to Manohar, but eventually fails. While it is true that the two major points of temporal reference in the story are that of Partition in 1947 and the Insurgency in the 1980s, in a curious instance, the story presents the violence of the Partition as itself an iteration of a cycle of violence in the history of the the the religious conflict. Consider the gruesome murder of Hussain Baksh’s youngest child who is murdered despite his innocent cries to avenge the deaths of “tenth Guru’s children” (35) — Zorawar Singh and Fateh Singh, sons of Sri Guru Gobind Singh — who were killed by Nawab Wazir Khan of Sirhind in 1705. The original Punjabi mentions that the weapon used to kill Hussain Baksh’s family is the *kirpan*, a single-edged curved sword, recommended in Sri Guru Gobind Singh’s commandments as one of the five *Ks*. The English translation is “sword” or “dagger” which evacuates the religious connotations of a *kirpan* and underplays its symbolic value. The cyclical waves of violence, therefore, are situated within the larger socio-religious history of South Asia of which the Partition and the Insurgency are painted as mere iterations.

The depiction of violence in “Shadows” is also untypical because the narrator of the story belongs to a community that is rendered safe from the two waves of violence: while the violence of the Partition targets Muslims (the family of Hussain Baksh), the violence of the insurgency attacks Hindus (Manohar and his father). They are the *spectators* of gory violence



resulting in the murders of their family friends, and eventually haunted by their violent memory. But memory as an agent of remembering is haunted by its amorphous nature, as it is animated by forgetting, erasing and healing. Does “Shadows” present to us any possibility of memory acting as a healer in face of all the horrific violence? Or is it merely a repository of pain and suffering that continues to haunt the collective psyche of its characters?

### III

#### Remedial Hermeneutics: Memory, Forgetting and Healing

“Our memory is a more perfect world than the universe: she gives back life to those that don't exist any more.”

— Guy de Maupassant, "Suicides", *Les sœurs Rondoli* (1884)

In this section, I illustrate the paradoxical nature of memory in the text: it serves as the psychic site of the traumatic “event” but it also distorts that remembrance by forgetting, and thereby opens up possibilities of healing and moving ahead. Additionally, it also paints the past *before* the trauma as an idyllic space against which the deterioration in the present is mapped.

Even as it is a tale of horrifying violence, the “Shadows” paradoxically starts not on a grim note but by recounting the days of a pre-Partition idyllic space of communal harmony, youthful laughter and innocent happiness. The playful bliss of Reshma, the daughter of Hussain Baksh and Fatima, playing with the narrator echoing the refrain — “We will drag our feet...go home only after it rains.” (31) — presents to the readers a merry past *before* the ravages of the Partition. I emphasise this to underline the story’s complex rendering of the past: it is the source of pain *and* consolation, simultaneously. The story’s investment in a meta-narrative of story-telling is also fascinated with this dual nature of memories. The past lives on in the stories that travel from one generation to the next, carrying forward the nostalgia of happy days left behind as well as the scarring of the pain and agony.

It is in the blurry and amorphous nature of memory, I suggest, that the story opens up an imaginative realm of collectivity in which the communal markers of its characters dissolve into each other, thereby erasing their religious identities in favour of shared humanity. The realm of imagination, free from the stringent logic of reason, carves out another space in the narrative where helplessness in the face of violence binds disparate communities with each other across the confines of space and time. When Fazal Haq bows down before Balbir Singh, the narrator states that in his memory his “face would blend with the faces of Kashmiri pandits, who had stood beseeching in Anandpur Sahib” (34). The reference here is to the Kashmiri Pandits who had approached Guru Tegh Bahadur in Anandpur Sahib in 1675, seeking protection from the Mughal King, Aurangzeb. Memory acts as a bridge of solidarity between Muslims in 1947 and the Kashmiri Pandits fleeing the atrocities by the Mughals in 1675 as it blends their faces in the abstract figure of the helpless victims. Consider too a





similar strain of blending of faces of different communities in a “blurry” human figure as the victim:

Often, the images we had of Muslims, from our family tales, would get sullied by all the stories [of Muslims as perpetrators] we had heard about other Muslims from Pargat. Their faces would become blurry. And then would emerge a figure from that haze, a bent neck and a shining sword piercing through it and it would become vibrant before our eyes. We don’t know whose neck it was? Was it Fazal Haq’s...? Of his eight-year-old grandson? Of Pargat’s uncle or brother?... But many times we felt that it was our neck! (36)

The hazy victim figure in the realm of imagination can therefore encompass Muslims, Hindus and the children themselves in whose imagination such thoughts are arising, across borders of religion, space and time. In yet another instance, the narrator claims that the *face* of Abdul Gani resembled that of his maternal grandfather, and elsewhere, while being carried by Balbir Singh, he *imagines* that it was as if “Balbir Singh had lifted Fazal Haq on his shoulders” (39). Imagination, freed from stringent reason and reality, is the site where a shared communal being is first-made apparent in the story even in the face of such a gruesome cyclical history of violence.

It is tempting to invoke here the ethical reflex embedded within Levinas’ reading of the “the Same and the Other” (Levinas 26). Levinas maintains that the Other is “infinitely foreign” yet it is only in *his face* that one can glimpse the “infinitely transcendent” where “epiphany is produced” that can “break with the world that can be common to us, whose virtualities are inscribed in our nature and developed by our existence” (Levinas 300). “Shadows” achieves the radical acceptance of the alterity of the Other in a slightly different manner, one that Levinas rejects. The imagination of the narrator blurs the figure of Abdul Gani and Fazal Haq with *his* own or *his* relatives. Levinas regrets that the working mechanism of ontology: is “a reduction of the other to the same” (43). It would be a fertile area of study to see the way the ethical reflex in “Shadows” develops by blurring (reducing?) everyone’s faces into the face of either his own or his family members.

Beneath the pervasive violence between Muslims and Sikhs in the village, the story soon opens up a radically different space for harmony after the entry of Abdul Gani, the Muslim from Pakistan who is visiting his native village. Gani, a member of the same community who had been slaughtered mercilessly in the village, is met with boundless love and welcome on his return: “the people of the village were flocking to him and taking turns to invite him for food at their place” and “he was responding to the joyful and curious queries of the people” and “exchanging pleasantries” (39-40). (The word in the original Punjabi is *ram-Tamiya*, literally, “to talk of Ram and Rahim.” The English translation – “pleasantries” – is much plainer and underplays the strategic use of *ram-Tamiya* in the context of the bridging of broken communal ties at this juncture in the story.)

Gani’s character might also be an intertextual reference to Mohan Rakesh’s “The Owner of Rubble.” In that context, the intertextual study of Rakkha Pehelwan and Balbir is useful, as both stories force the perpetrators and the victims to come *face to face* with each



other and open up a possibility of forgiving in the face of the gory violence of the Partition. My understanding is that it is possible to read “Shadows” as a palimpsest and a contradiction to “The Owner of Rubble”: while the intertextual references open up a possibility of forgiving, “Shadows” advances the argument by underlining how the violence of the Partition was, unfortunately, accursed to be repeated in the history of Punjab.

Even as Balbir Singh shies away from meeting Gani initially, their eventual meeting brings forth a communal harmony despite the violent legacy of the Partition — Balbir Singh greets him with “Salaam, Maulvi Ji” and Gani responds with “*Sat Sri Akal*, Sardar Balbir Singh” (41) — thereby exchanging the social greetings traditionally associated with their religions. By imploring Balbir Singh to “sweeten [his] mouth and spit the bitterness away,” Gani invites him to share *jalebis* with him to which Balbir Singh reluctantly agrees, but then proposes that he will eat with Gani on the same plate: “*Shah*, don’t put more...I will take from this plate...I will not become untouchable...” (42) It remains unclear in the story whether Gani knows explicitly that Balbir Singh was involved in murdering Hussain Baksh’s family but he argues that it was the over-arching political structure that caused Partition and “[n]ow all repent, my dear brother!” (40) A counter-point might be to say that the story redeems Balbir Singh without any consequence for his actions — I differ with that position slightly. What the story narrates is a consequence of how the social fabric of the village is torn asunder amidst the wave of Partition violence. Indeed, as Joya Chatterjee warns, one wonders “why people who had lived cheek by jowl for so long fell upon each other in 1947 and its aftermath, with a ferocity that has few parallels in history” (qtd. in Sengupta xi). I suggest that with the interaction between Gani and Balbir Singh, the story presents to us an avenue for collective healing and the repair of broken social ties after the Partition.

But even as the story presents to us the possibility of moving beyond violence, is such a project sustainable at all? Or are the characters in the story accursed to suffer the same cyclicity of violent history again?

#### IV

#### The Spectre Haunts Again: Cyclicity, Violence, Helplessness

“Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real.”  
— Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992)

In this concluding section, I wish to interrogate the second wave of violence that finds voice in the text, that of the insurgency in the 1980s. I argue that as compared to earlier waves of violence, the bloodshed of the insurgency establishes in the text that instead of being a disruption, violence has come to be cyclic with a far more amorphous, shadowy and unreadable character. In the first section of the essay, I argued how the violence of the 1980s in “Shadows” carries within itself the ring of 1947. Here, I wish to investigate how this particular wave of violence is similar yet different from that of 1947.



When faced with the repeated worsening of social climate some decades after the Partition, the narrator's friend, Manohar, confides in him about his fears of having to leave his village. In the narrator's mind, this rings a parallel with how Hussain Baksh had sought the help of his grandfather during the Partition. His response to Manohar, however, reveals how helpless he feels in the face of the recurrent waves of violence and displacement. I wanted to reassure him with my grandfather's words. "Don't feel bad for nothing...this confusion is short-lived...who leaves his hearth and home, O Simpleton! You have to come back here...and live here... But how could I say all this to him? What was in my hands? (42)

He cannot even say any empty words of consolation to his friend, because even the earnest words of his grandfather to Hussain Baksh had been rendered superficial in the wake of the violence of the Partition. In the face of a new form of violence, there is now a tacit acknowledgement within the narrator's remarks that *this violent "confusion" is, after all, not "short-lived" but that it is now the very state of being in the world itself*, a "background" against which life needs to be lived. Shortly afterwards, Manohar and his father are killed in "senseless" firing. Their perpetrators are never identified: "And now who knows who 'they' were! They had come marching, and left after indulging in the preposterous act...Nobody had an answer to that question" (45). While at least the perpetrators of the violence of the Partition could be identified, the current violence is so pervasive and "senseless" that no clear perpetrator could be blamed. "They" who had sprayed bullets fatally wounding Manohar and his father always remain "they" in the story: unidentifiable, unblameable, unrecognisable. The omnipresent violence is met with the surrender of thought on the part of "sensible, mature people" (*saying*): they grieve about the loss of lives, but are "quiet about those who had sprayed the bullets" (45). They recede into silence, almost acquiescing to the pervasive violence that is now a reality that they are forced to live with.

It is useful here to invoke Slavoj Žižek's theorization of subjective and objective violence. Žižek in his treatise *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* distinguishes between two types of violence: "subjective violence" is "the most visible" and "performed by an identifiable agent"; "objective violence" is "invisible" embedded within "the contours of the background which generates such outbursts" (Žižek 1). He also clarifies that while "subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level...of "normal," peaceful state of things," objective violence is different in the way "it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent" (Žižek 2). While I am not arguing for *applying* Žižek's theorization of violence to the story, I suggest that from the Partition to the Insurgency, violence has moved from being a disruption — a consequence of subjective violence — to more pervasive and senseless violence that has seeped into the social fabric in the story, constituting a "non-zero level standard". The zero-level against which subjective violence is mapped has also refigured because, with the horrifying memory of the Partition in the background, any new eruption of violence does not seem a disruption but a mere coming forth of violence that was always lying beneath the surface. The story paints the violence of the Partition in South Asia, therefore, as veering





away from a “subjective” violence as disruption with a clearly identifiable agent to an “objective violence” that characterises the unidentifiable, slow, intangible violence against which other eruptions of violence are adjudicated (and for which no clear perpetrators can be blamed).

The “child-like” question that the narrator’s youngest daughter poses at the end — “Respected Mother: By any chance was Balbir Singh there among those who had fired last night?” (45) — introduces the theme of the *recurrence* of violence yet again. After all, the victims have changed but the larger social schisms facilitating violence have sustained. As compared to the “sensible and mature people” who had “stopped asking such questions,” the child’s inquiry yet again collapses two timelines into one another as it becomes challenging for her to keep apart two seemingly similar narratives of violence that she has been consuming. But even as the story might hint that the “child-like question” is mature in itself, it also carries the terrifying possibility that yet another generation in the family — the narrator’s children — has been interpellated into the violent intergenerational trauma being passed on from every generation to the next. While her identification of the cyclicity of violence is an intelligent gesture, the very fact that children in the family are depicted as consuming stories of graphic violence from their elders is a *cycle of trauma in itself* that carries the possibility of both its catharsis and perpetuation.

In this essay, I have argued for an analytical emphasis on the relationship between violence, trauma and time. In Waryam Singh Sandhu’s “Shadows,” the violent “event” resists being bound to a demarcated temporal territory, and it recurs time and again in memory and reality. While memory serves as a reservoir of painful memories that pushes one to revisit the traumatic past, its imaginative power also opens up possibilities for collective healing. The recurrent waves of violence, however, that of the Partition and the Insurgency, cause the time perception of past-present-future to crash into one another as later violence invokes the “trope” of the Partition violence. The story also hints toward the possibility that violence is no longer a mere disruption in an idyllic space but an unfortunate and all-pervasive reality that the characters in Sandhu’s “Shadow” need to inhabit. I will end on a note of hope. If violence is cyclic, so is the human spirit and desire to form solidarity in face of that threat. I conclude this essay in the silent hope that in the face of the *recurrent* waves of violence, the inhabitants of South Asia hold on to that resolute intimacy.

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