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Making the 'Invisible' 'Visible': Literary Representation of Partition and the Reaction of Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Sucharita Banerjee

MPhil,

Department of Comparative Literature,

Jadavpur University,

Kolkata.

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Abstract:

The partition of India and the birth of Pakistan is one of the most violent chapters of human history. The partition has affected millions of ordinary citizens of both countries directly or indirectly. Literature as well as history has reflected upon the trauma and loss caused due to partition. Unlike history, literature gives voice to those people, whom society excludes due to their gender, caste, class, and physical or mental disabilities. Persons with disabilities are one of the most neglected sections in all societies. Including the first-hand experience of persons with disabilities adds a new dimension to partition narratives. This paper attempts to discuss the literary representation of people with Autism spectrum disorder within the context of the partition of India and Pakistan and their reaction towards the society through a comparative analysis between Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and Salman Rushdie's *Shame*.

Keywords: Autism, family, memory, partition, trauma.

The partition of India and Pakistan is one of the most violent chapters in the history of South Asia. Due to the partition, millions of ordinary citizens lost their lives and thousands

became refugees. Trauma and immense loss caused by the partition of India and Pakistan find a voice in the writings of the writers, poets, novelists, playwrights, and film directors of both countries. Poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz rightly puts across the sentiments in his lines, "This stain-covered day-break, this night-bitten dawn. This dawn is not that dawn we craved for" (Chhetry 302).

The exact history of partition is impossible to know because documenting the history of partition consciously or unconsciously eliminates the trauma of an individual, particularly a person belonging to a minor section of society. Urvashi Butalia in her article entitled "Community, State and Gender: Some Reflections on the Partition of India" rightly raises the question, "Why had the history of partition been so incomplete, so silent on the experiences of the thousands of people it affected? Was this just historiographical neglect or something deeper: a fear, on the part of some historians, of reopening a trauma so profound, so riven with both pain and guilt, that they were reluctant to approach it"? (Butalia 33). History and literature represent the tragedy of partition, but literature is more potent as it captures the personal narratives of human beings; in contrast to history, which gives its readers only the statistical account of the movement. Unlike literature, history is concerned only with preserving the data of the powerful rulers and their families. Ordinary citizens find no voice in history. The persons with disabilities remain perhaps the most neglected section of the society. The experience of the partition and its impact on the non-disabled and disabled people has never been the same. My paper aims to concentrate on the literary representation of the partition of India and Pakistan and the different impacts it had on the persons with Autism spectrum disorder and their non-disabled family members. In this paper, I refer to Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983).

Autism spectrum disorder is one of the twenty-one kinds of disabilities included in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016). Autism is a complex neurological disorder

that involves persistent challenges with social communication, restricted interests and repetitive behaviors. Shubhangi Vaidya in her seminal book *Autism and the Family in Urban India* defines Autism as “a complex neurobehavioral disorder that includes impairments in social interaction and developmental language and communication skills combined with rigid, repetitive behaviors” (Vaidya 2). The autism rights movement, also known as the autistic acceptance movement, is a social movement allied with disability rights that highlights a neurodiversity paradigm, viewing Autism as a disability with variations in the human brain rather than a disease to cure. My paper attempts to critically study how the psyche of the protagonists of the selected texts, namely Baba in *Clear Light of Day* and Sufiya in *Shame* react to the familial and societal attitudes towards them. By doing so they try to establish a narrative of their own.

The term ‘Autism’ was first found in 1911 in the research of German psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler. Bleuler identified a symptom of the most severe cases of schizophrenia as Autism. Bleuler identified Autism as infantile wishes to avoid unsatisfying realities and replace them with fantasies and hallucinations. Autism was treated as schizophrenia in Britain till the 1950s. However, in the 1960s some British child psychologists challenged the model suggested by Bleuler and regarded child psychology as science. In the 1970s Autism began to denote a complete lack of a conscious life. Michael Rutter, a leading child-psychiatric researcher from the Maudsley Hospital, UK, conducted the first-ever genetic study of Autism and claimed in 1972 that ‘the autistic child has a deficiency of fantasy rather than an excess’ [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3757918>].

In 1943, the American psychiatrist Leo Kanner used the term ‘early infantile Autism’ to describe children who lack interest in other people. In 1944 Hans Asperger, an Austrian pediatrician independently described another group of children with similar behaviors, but with milder severity and higher intellectual abilities as autistic. The earliest mention of

Autism in Indian literature may date back to 1944, from a Viennese pediatrician named Angelica Ronald. Ronald presented an overview of the causes, detection, types, and treatment of what she termed abnormal children in the very same year. The first time the term Autism appeared in Indian literature was in 1959, and a half dozen publications appeared through the 1960s (<http://www.autism-india.org> › history-autism-india). Beyond that, there was limited knowledge about Autism in medical science. Autism or Autism spectrum disorder, as it has now come to be known, is identified by impairments or difficulties in the areas of language, social behaviors and imagination that usually manifest themselves within the first 3 years of a child's life. Autism as a disorder is growing rapidly in a developing context, where the hegemony of Western biomedicine and definitions of 'normality' and 'abnormality' is well entrenched. Thus, it is found that in India awareness—at least among a particular class of urban educated Indians—is on the rise and Autism diagnoses are increasing in number, as well as frequency.

Nevertheless, whether women and men with Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are appropriately represented and whether the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) has adequately succeeded in ensuring a complete burden-free life and full participation of persons with Autism spectrum disorder is still a question of great concern. However, disabled heroes are celebrated in literature as well as real life; but the disabled non-heroes often go unacknowledged. Hence, a comparative analysis between two characters belonging to two different geographical locations through the medium of literature is an excellent way to synthesize frequently disjointed areas of work and can serve as a helpful tool for researchers working both in that country and in that area.

Anita Desai's autobiographical and chronologically ninth novel *Clear Light of Day* was published in 1980. The novel is split into four sections and captures adulthood, adolescence and early adulthood, childhood, and a final return to an adult perspective of the

four siblings of the Das family—namely Raja, Bimla, Tara, and their autistic brother Baba. Baba is not given any other name but merely referred to as Baba throughout the novel. The novel portrays the stagnant motion of Das family and the constant recollection of the past. Desai restricts the action of the novel within Old Delhi and more specifically, within the house and the garden of Das family and its immediate neighborhood. The times captured in this novel are the late 1930s, 1947 to 1948, and a few days in the 1970s. The novel narrates the story of Bimla, the elder sister of the Das family after the death of her parents as the caregiver of alcoholic aunt Mira and her autistic brother Baba. The novelist here portrays Bimla as someone, who neither can overcome the trauma of the partition and the political turmoil following it, nor can she get rid of the enormous responsibilities of the family members.

Baba is physically there, but his existence amounts to nothing. He does not empathize with his family amidst the political chaos. Baba listens to old western pop music on Benazir's gramophone throughout the day, which, despite being disturbing, does not appear to be annoying to Bimla. Unlike Tara, Bimla is familiar with Baba's attachment to these old records. Baba is so obsessed with the records that the political chaos does not impact him, and he rushes off outside when one of the records malfunctions. Throughout the novel, Baba is never found to participate in any household matters or express concern regarding the political upheaval. The novelist does not include the aspects of Baba's education and employment in the novel. Although Bimla and Tara are once found to motivate Baba to go to work, no sincere effort is found on the part of the Das sisters to help Baba become self-dependent. Bimla can be regarded as the most responsible person in Das family about Baba's welfare. Cindy Lacom rightly points out that Bim comes to recognize that it was Baba's silence and reserve and otherworldliness that she had wanted to break open and ran-sack and rob (Lacom 144).

Set in post-independent India, *Clear Light of Day* centers on Bimla or Bim, the binding thread to the disintegrating family. "Tara wonders how Bim can stay on in a shabby house, taking care of her retarded brother Baba, and teaching history to young girls in a college" (Hashmi 56). However, much involvement of Tara cannot be found in terms of understanding Baba's psyche. Baba is the youngest sibling of all and is not able to deal with the change of cultural advancement. For the other characters in the text and especially to Bimla, he is seen as an unavoidable responsibility. However, this responsibility keeps on shifting from the parents to their children, from the married children to the unmarried ones--causing guilt to all family members. Though Baba's dependence is a constant event, he is never shown in the entire novel as a hassle that cannot be managed. Desai portrays Baba as a victim of pity, rather than a person conscious of his human rights. He is autistic and unable to cope up with the new world after the partition. In the context of the conversation between the two sisters, their childhood is discovered. Soon after the birth of Baba, it was noticed that the youngest child was slow in learning and was born with Autism. Baby skills "as turning over, sitting up, smiling in response, talking, standing or walking-it all seemed to take an age with him. He seemed to have no desire to reach out and take anything. It was as if his parents, too aged, had given birth to a child without vitality or will – all had gone into other, earlier children and there was nothing left for this last, late one" (Desai 103). Their mother soon got tired of carrying Baba and taking care of him. She soon became restless and complained, "My Bridge is suffering" (Desai 103).

In spite of living in Washington, USA for years, Tara cannot forget the Old Delhi house, full of memories of the recent and remote past of the two decades since 1947, and her childhood days. Throughout the novel, the readers also delve into the childhood days of the two Das sisters. In contrast to Bimla, Tara is quiet, less confident, and possesses delicate

feelings. The family's petrified state both draws Tara in and repulses her enough to make her think again of fleeing to that 'disinfected land' in which she lived with Bakul.

In contrast to *Clear Light of Day*, Salman Rushdie's third novel *Shame* contains the unforgettable character of Sufiya Zenobia. The novel is set in Q, a fictional version of Quetta. Sufiya Zenobia represents dual subalternity--the subjugated Pakistani womanhood on one hand, and the shame of being intellectually disabled on the other. Disability and violence are meted out by Sufiya Zenobia, who is also known as shame. Like many parents, Raza Hyder and Bilquis Hyder expected a son. But their dream completely got smashed when Bilquis gave birth to Sufiya, a girl with Autism. Sufiya, whose name means wisdom, does not conform to the 'standard' intellectual level. Her parents are ashamed of her, for different reasons, but her mother assumes that God made Sufiya stupid as a punishment for her infidelity; because she cheated on Sufiya's father. Through *Shame* Rushdie reiterates the societal stigma associated with disability, where disability is often considered to be the verdict of God as a result of any wrongdoing. Sufiya does not conform to the submissive attitude of her society and therefore she wants to take revenge. At the age of 12, she went out and killed 218 Turkeys. Sufiya Zenobia had torn off their heads and reached down into their bodies to draw their guts up their neck. The authorial comment is forthcoming- "Twelve years of unloved humiliation take their toll..." (Rushdi 123). Being a social outcast and oppressed ever since her birth, she retaliates the amount of suffering she has been forced to endure. Aijaz Ahmad in his book *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* argues that women are able to resist the social and historical pressures placed on them because of their gender (Afzal 7). However, Rushdie's idea of women in *Shame* disagrees with this statement. Ahmad believes that in spite of Sufiya Zenobia being given the ability to overthrow her wrongdoers, she has been treated as shameful because of her gender position. Joseph Adamson and Hilary Clark argue that whenever a person is subjected to devaluation on the

basis of gender, race or physical disability; the person internalizes this as a negative judgment which is when shame occurs in them (Afzal 9). Sufiya learns to feel deeply excluded not only in the broader external society but also within her family. The story revolves around three families, the Shakil family, the Harappa family and the Hyder family. Omar Khayyam, son of Chunni, Munnee and Bunny belongs to the Shakil family and is a doctor. He becomes acquainted with Iskander Harappa and General Hyder. As the author describes, Sufiya Zenobia, daughter of General Hyder, "was of slight built, had a weakness for pine kernels, and her arms and legs were imperfectly co-ordinated when she walked. Despite this ambulatory awkwardness, however, she would not have struck a stranger as being particularly abnormal" (Rushdie 197). She was also called a "miracle-gone-wrong" by her family members. Sufiya was named Shame because she was seen as a harbinger of shame in her family. A son would have kept the continuation and authority of the Hyder family alive; but being a girl, and on top of that an autistic girl, she was hopeless beyond hope for her family. Disabled persons are sometimes equated with 'beasts' and their disability is treated as a penalty for committing any sin by the disabled person or his/her close family members.

Unlike Baba, Sufiya in Rushdie's novel is marked by her violent reaction towards her society. "Violence is the main theme born out of shame. The concepts of shame and shamelessness are explored through the characters of Sufiya Zenobia and Omar Khayyam respectively. The novel portrays elements of family and marriage, politics and culture and colonial and postcolonial concepts" (Shanthi and Raja 2).

Rushdie's use of the intellectually disabled female body to represent the shame of a whole society is well crafted in the novel. Salman Rushdie's *Shame* is to a considerable extent about how society defines disability. It is a narrative of how the life and character of its female protagonist, Sufiya Zenobia is circumscribed by her bodily and mental features. Sufiya was born in a society that is based on the authority and continuity of the male family

name and the male inheritance of property. Sufiya is undesired because she is a woman with a disability; who is leveled as an ‘unmarriageable child’. Her father says, “...but a damaged child, should we look for husbands at all?” (Rushdie 161) Yet Sufiya questions the societal stigma that prevents her from being a mother. Sufiya gets married to a British-educated doctor, named Omar Khayyam. At first sight, Omar Khayyam developed a sexual obsession with her. His responses to her were made up of a compound of attraction and repulsion, desire and fear. Sufiya was therefore desirable and undesirable, unmarriageable and marriageable. Omar was caught up in an ambivalent web of reactions vis-à-vis the disabled native woman. Such a structure of feelings is similar to Western comprehension of the Orient. Internalized British norms divided native men from native women. Sufiya was further marked by Omar's internalized colonizing attitude. Sufiya's marriage might be a fiction. It was a political and social arrangement to benefit the more non-disabled persons entrusted with her care, primarily her legal father, Hyder. However, contrary to how much of a burden and useless her parents thought her to be, Sufiya loved children. She was a much better mother than her sister, who was not disabled. Her family does not allow Sufiya to take care of the babies, for babies are for ‘normal’ girls like Sufiya's sister, not for someone who is mentally disabled. As the author says, if the society gave the permission and the allowance then Sufiya would have had a family of her own.

Both novels address the aspect of partition and try to locate the different impacts on the reaction of persons with disabilities and their non-disabled family members. In the first case, Baba does not respond to the political chaos happening around him. He is not found involved in any remarkable action—like taking part in political agitation or providing Bimla with mental satisfaction. At one point in the first part of the novel, Tara persistently asks Baba if he is going to the office to perform duties; at which Baba does not make any comment which shows his reluctance to take up the family's responsibility. In contrast to

Baba, Sufiya brutally kills many people as a reaction to the shame that society has caused her. Bimla is very cautious about Baba's welfare; whereas, Sufiya largely remains neglected. Throughout the novel, the aspect of Baba's education, employment, or marriage is entirely missing; whereas Sufiya raises questions about her inability to be a mother. Disability studies incorporate multiple aspects pertinent to the characteristics of human beings. If the characters of Baba and Sufiya are critically analyzed, then it can be found that they are very opposite in temperament. In the novel, Baba does not perform any 'man-like' act, whereas Sufiya stands up to question the gender stereotype. Sufiya is more aware of her rights as a human being, but Baba is not. The tension of the movement is much more violent in *Shame* than *Clear Light of Day*. *Clear Light of Day* and *Shame* represent the turmoil caused at the moment of the partition of India and Pakistan respectively; however, the portrayal of the protagonists and the other characters in these texts and their reactions toward politics is significantly different. Compared to Baba, Sufiya is more successful in the sense that she fights for her rights; which establishes the right-based model of disability over the charity model.

The selection of these two texts somewhat tries to focus on the gap between the attitude of projecting a person with disability as a mere passive object of society to an active agent of securing equal opportunity and thereby securing a life with dignity. Rights for Persons with Disabilities Act emphasizes persons with disabilities achieving equal rights and livelihood like their 'non-disabled' citizens. Nevertheless, achieving equal rights for persons with disabilities in India is still a daydream. The release and subsequent Academy Award for the film *Rain Man* in 1988 brought Autism to the conscious world of educated men in India, just as it did in many other countries. Around the same time, some parents in India took the initiative of writing in the media about Autism, speaking to students, and creating awareness in the community. In 1991, some parents having children with Autism spectrum disorder got together and founded Action for Autism in Delhi to advocate for children and adults having

Autism and their families. In 1994, Action for Autism started a full-time one-year teacher training course in Delhi. This organization also started publishing a periodical called the 'Autism Network' to share developments in the respective field and to act as a forum for discussion. In October 1996, Action for Autism led a delegation of parents of autistic children from all over India to meet the Secretary of the Ministry of Welfare and lobby for the inclusion of Autism in Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Full Participation and Protection of Rights) Bill 1995. The Karnataka Parents Association for Mentally Retarded Children inaugurated a one-year training in 1996 to enhance the awareness about persons having Autism. By the late twentieth century and in twenty-first century many organizations have been founded for the upliftment of autistic people. Chief among these is the Autism Society West Bengal (ASWB) established in 2002 in Kolkata, Society of Parents of Children with Autistic Disorders (SOPAN) 2002 in Mumbai, The Autistic Self Advocacy Network and Autism Society of India (2006) in Bengaluru, Centre for Autism & other Disabilities Rehabilitation Research & Education (CADRRE) 2017 in Kerala and Swabodhini Charitable Trust in 1989 in Chennai, Tamilnadu. In 2000, a boy with autism from Bangalore, Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, published his first book, *Beyond the Silence: My Life, the World and Autism*. The book includes writings from when he was between eight and eleven years old and brought international attention to Tito and his mother's methods of teaching him. Every year 2nd April is observed as the Autism Awareness Day to enhance the discussion and an empathetic attitude towards persons having Autism spectrum disorder. Disability studies should be given more attention as it is a comparatively newly-developed subject and it can enrich the attitude of society towards one of the most neglected sections of society.

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