



“The Palimpsest of the Soul”: A Critical Study of *Invisible Ink* by Neelum Saran Gour- Rewrites the Grammar of Hindu-Muslim Friendship in India

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Abstract:

The article examines *Invisible Ink* (2015), by Neelum Saran Gour, as a way to intervene in the representation of postcolonial India, especially Hindu-Muslim relations, in literature. Going beyond the old histories of tolerance and conflict, the article suggests that Gour employs the notion of the palimpsest, a manuscript page in which a layer of text is partially deleted and superimposed to develop a structural tool as well as a metaphor. The critical study shows that the intricacy of syncretic life is subtly portrayed in the novel through the prism of palimpsest theory, postcolonial memory, and cultural geography, revealing latent violence. Gour uses sensory details to create the "kshetra" of Allahabad: "the conscious presence of a central intellect that, in the midst of vast distances, of storms, of darkness, of night, overruled all obstacles into one steady co-operation in a national result" (*De Quincey* 409).

The central contention of this article is that Gour fundamentally *rewrites the grammar of Hindu-Muslim friendship* by shifting critical attention from political events to the ordinary practices through which coexistence is sustained. This ethical understanding of coexistence distinguishes *Invisible Ink* from many canonical narratives of Partition and communal violence. Gour's narrative neither denies historical violence nor minimizes its consequences. Rather, it asks a different set of questions: *What survives violence? How do ordinary people continue living together after history has fractured their shared worlds? Where does memory reside once official histories have silenced it?*

Another distinctive aspect of *Invisible Ink* is that, in contrast to the majority of stories concerning communal violence, it keeps its focus on gendered space and on the concept of the 'Palimpsest of the Soul'. In this discussion, *Invisible Ink* is an important text to interpret how literature preserves the ethical, affective, and spatial dimensions of collective memory and advances scholarship on the grammar of Hindu-Muslim co-existence in South Asian literature through the persistent yet often invisible inscriptions of shared histories, remembrance, domestic settings and everyday practices of plural belonging.

Keywords: Palimpsest, Hindu-Muslim, Syncretism, Trauma, Memory, Partition, Postcolonial Existence, Violence, Friendship.

Introduction

The literary representation of Hindu-Muslim relations in postcolonial India has increasingly become a contested site where competing histories, fractured memories, and ideological constructions of nationhood are negotiated. Since the Partition of 1947, Indian English literature has persistently interrogated the relationship between violence and coexistence, producing narratives that document both the catastrophic rupture of communal harmony and the fragile persistence of shared cultural life. While canonical Partition texts have primarily foregrounded displacement, massacre, and political disintegration, a growing corpus of contemporary fiction has redirected critical attention toward the ways in which trauma becomes embedded in everyday life, memory, and identity (*Lobe*, 54). Narratives in this growing body of post-partition literature do more than just reconstruct historical episodes of conflict; they also investigate the psychological, cultural, and affective residues that continue to shape inter-community relationships long after the actual event. Such literary contributions highlight the permanence of unsaid memories and underscore the intricacies of living side by side in societies divided by historical atrocity.

Gour's Invisible Ink (2015) plays a unique role in this literary world within this evolving body of postcolonial literature. Set in Allahabad (now Prayagraj), a city historically celebrated for its composite *Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb*, the novel neither reconstructs communal violence through spectacular historical episodes nor confines itself to nostalgic representations of syncretic culture. Focusing on communal violence, the novel does not expose the brutality to the reader, but rather sets up the scene of trauma as an invisible yet permanent presence through which communal identities are produced, remembered, erased, and rewritten within the domestic settings, personal interactions, and collective memory. The metaphor of "*invisible ink*" becomes the novel's basic epistemological framework for conceptualizing trauma; not as an occurrence that is instantly apparent or narrated, but as an inscription hidden

beneath the surface of daily living. This metaphor is best expressed in Rekha's reflection: "*Our stories are written in invisible ink. The unreadable inscriptions that are locked in us, and which can only be read with the hot iron of a scorching provocation.*" (Gour, 152–153). *Invisible Ink* emphasizes that trauma does not fade away with time; rather, it lurks and waits for moments of emotional or political provocation, when suppressed memories are revealed. The novel can thus be interpreted as a process of uncovering, or making sense of what has been observed, and it encourages the reader to engage in an interpretive process rather than simply observe.

According to Lisa Freigang, this literary corpus discusses the aesthetic strategies of expressing the unspeakable, including documentary realism and using photographs to represent the "un-representability" of communal violence (Freigang, 8). Such texts recognize that historical trauma cannot be fully captured through linear historiography because violence exceeds conventional modes of narration and persists through silence, absence, and affective discontinuity. While Freigang's analysis convincingly demonstrates how post-Partition fiction develops innovative aesthetic strategies to negotiate traumatic memory (Freigang, 8); *Invisible Ink* extends this trajectory by relocating trauma from the exceptional moment of violence to the ordinary rhythms of everyday co-existence in which Hindus and Muslims have long lived together in the north of India. Memory, in this context, becomes less an act of retrospective recollection than an ongoing mode of inhabiting space, relationships, and cultural identity (Lobe, 67-68); which is precisely embodied in Gour's conception of postcolonial memory.

The setting of the novel, the city of Allahabad (now Prayagraj), a sacred place of Hindus because the "Triveni Sangam", "at the bottom of the tree, on the river bed, live Brahma-ji and Shiv-ji and Vishnu-ji - that's why this place is called Triveni" (Gour, 50), was located there, and also historically important, because of its composite "Ganga-Yamuna Tehzeeb" (culture), turns into a character on its own. *Das and Tripathi's* influential formulation of *kshetra*

have significantly advanced understanding of the novel's spatial imagination by conceptualizing Allahabad as a culturally layered landscape in which religious traditions, historical narratives, and everyday experiences intersect rather than exist in isolation (392). *Invisible Ink* redefines the grammar of Hindu-Muslim friendship by the figure of the “palimpsest”. The “palimpsest” is named after the Greek word *palimpsestos* (scraped again), and is a page of a manuscript, on which the original text has been scraped away to allow new writing to be written upon the surface, but the earlier writing can still be read beneath the surface. Instead of depicting palimpsest merely as a metaphor for layered history, Gour transforms it into a mode of historical consciousness that reveals how erased memories continue to inhabit contemporary social life. Drawing upon Thomas De Quincey's influential conception of the palimpsest, as a model of historical persistence, the article contends that Gour relocates the palimpsest from the manuscript to the social world itself, where cities, bodies, domestic settings, and material objects become living archives of accumulated historical experience (*De Quincey, 141–45*)

Michel Foucault's ‘*Genealogy*’ offers a productive framework for understanding Gour's narrative because it rejects linear historical continuity in favour of tracing the fragmented, discontinuous, and often suppressed processes through which knowledge is constituted (*Foucault, 139–40*). In *Invisible Ink*, historical truth does not emerge from official political narratives but from the fragmented memories of ordinary individuals whose experiences remain excluded from institutional historiography. Rekha's recollections, neighbourhood stories, domestic rituals, and sensory encounters collectively function as what Foucault terms “*subjugated knowledge*” forms of historical understanding marginalized by dominant structures of power (*Foucault, 140*). Gour therefore resists the teleological narratives of nationalism that reduce Hindu-Muslim relations either to inevitable conflict or to an idealized secular harmony. Instead, the novel reconstructs history through the dispersed fragments of everyday experience,

revealing coexistence itself as a historically contingent and continually negotiated social practice.

According to Anne Frey, “No single place or person controls ... each act upon all, and all react upon each ... and will remove the need for a center because every part would be linked to every other part. Such a model diffuses agency: it is difficult to suggest where the action or movement might begin; we can only be sure that any movement or idea will spread across ...” (Frey 48-49); Gour is extending this argument to the friendships, domestic organization, culinary interactions, and is represented as a fragile historical practice continually threatened by ideological violence yet persistently sustained through ordinary acts of care, shared space, and embodied remembrance which constitute syncretic life in Allahabad. In doing so, Gour challenges both nationalist historiography and conventional trauma narratives by demonstrating that coexistence survives not despite historical violence but within its layered and unfinished aftermath.

The palimpsest has also had a lustrous career in the history of critical theory, especially, Thomas De Quincey’s romantic meditations on the ‘palimpsest of the human brain’ first articulated in *‘Suspiria de Profundis’*. In more recent times, the palimpsest has been incorporated into the field of postcolonial and memory studies as a way of theorizing the erasure of the history of the indigenous and minority by the colonial and nationalist ones, without being completely erased; “*What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain? Such a palimpsest is my brain; such a palimpsest, O reader! is yours*” (De Quincey 141-45). Although De Quincey’s metaphor originally concerned individual consciousness, subsequent scholarship has expanded its interpretive potential. Anne Frey argues that the palimpsest destabilizes linear historical narratives by revealing history as a process of continuous overwriting rather than sequential replacement (Frey 48). Similarly, Jerry Chia-Je Weng demonstrates that De Quincey’s palimpsest functions as an imperial archive in which

successive historical formations coexist despite attempts at ideological erasure (*Weng 17*). Building upon these insights, Gour relocates the palimpsest from the domain of textuality to the lived realities of postcolonial India. In *Invisible Ink*, the city, the body, domestic interiors, and material culture collectively function as palimpsestic archives where communal histories remain visible beneath successive layers of political and ideological inscription.

To begin with, it places *Invisible Ink* in a theoretical framework of palimpsest studies and reconceptualize the palimpsest beyond its conventional literary function as a metaphor of layered textuality? Second, it develops the concept of “*kshetra*” beyond cultural geography by demonstrating how Allahabad functions as a living archive of plural historical consciousness. Third, the gendered bodies and domestic spaces operate as alternative archives that preserve histories omitted from institutional and nationalist historiography. Lastly, it reflects on how the form of the novel, its discontinuous time, its dependence on found objects (letters, a notebook, a stolen stole), performs the palimpsestic logic of the novel, making the reader an archaeologist of his or her own lost past.

The “*kshetra*” of Syncretism

The idea of the “*kshetra*”, as presented by *Das and Tripathi*, is invaluable to the realization of how Gour materializes syncretism. They stem from the theoretical thoughts of *E. V. Ramakrishnan*, to suggest “*kshetra*” as a spatio-cultural universe of lived traditions, memories, experiences and shared attitude of the people; “Here, Ghazi Mian rested all year round, presiding over exorcisms and cures, blessing the barren and the depressed and the schizophrenic, acknowledging the quawwalis and the devotion of Hindus and Muslims and anyone else who felt like coming to him with a problem” (*Gour*, 8). ... “there are not and cannot be such incoherencies”; “heterogeneous elements . . . will not permit the grandeur of human unity greatly to be violated”; “the organizing principles . . . fuse into harmony”; the

subject becomes “omnipresent at one moment to every feature in the infinite review”. (*De Quincey* 175-176). Contrary to abstract concepts of tolerance or composite culture, embodiment is given greater importance in the “kshetra” and culture is not what people think but what they practice in common space; Meheru Apa adds, ‘*we built beautiful, serene mosques on the banks and we also looked after the Chhatreshwari Devi Temple. I remember my father going to the temple grounds and organizing the annual fair there... We used to appoint the Hindu priest for the temple and pay for his upkeep. And the mali of the temple was a Muslim*’ (*Gour* 96).

The spatial imagination of *Invisible Ink* fundamentally challenges the prevalent historiographical inclination to define communal identities through rigid religious boundaries. Instead of representing Allahabad (Prayagraj) merely as the geographical backdrop against which the narrative unfolds, Neelum Saran Gour reconstructs the city as a historically layered *kshetra*, a lived cultural field where memory, religion, emotion, and everyday interactions continually shape the meanings of belonging. The “kshetra” of Allahabad by Gour is constructed out of sensory details; “the conscious presence of a central intellect, that, in the midst of vast distances, of storms, of darkness, of night, overruled all obstacles into one steady co-operation” (*De Quincey* 409). The concept of memory embedded within *kshetra* can be further illuminated through ‘*Michel Foucault's idea of genealogy*’. Foucault challenges that genealogy rejects unified historical narratives in favour of tracing discontinuous, fragmented, and often suppressed versions of historical knowledge (*Foucault* 139–40). Instead of looking for a single source, genealogy reveals the multiplicity of historical forces that constitute social reality. Gour's representation of Allahabad performs precisely such a genealogical function. In the nationalist history, Muslims and Hindus are usually portrayed as two antagonistic and historically distinct communities. In contrast, Gour demonstrates that identities are produced relationally through continuous interaction within shared space. The boundaries separating

religious communities are not rigidly closed because there are many ways in which people in everyday life sustain each other, borrow from one another, and experience emotional relationships with one another. Such relational identity questions communal essentialism by focusing on a relational and historical interdependence instead of a civilizational separation.

The “kshetra” is made by material objects, which are unwilling to identify themselves as a religious object. Think of the pens and swords which Amma sharpens for Dusshera; “I did the pens. They were not fountain pens, there were no ball points and gel pens at the time, but worn-out nibs in tintured wooden holders and huge old ink-wells” (*Gour*, 11). Amina picks up a pen when she is helping with the polishing, and says, “*It knows how to write in Urdu. It should be Mussalman pen*” (*Gour*, 12). The reasoning of the child is both naive and deep, simultaneously, writing implements bear the impressions of their owners, and Urdu script, which is related to the literary culture of Muslims, leaves an imprint on the item itself. This association is complicated by Rekha's mother, who adds that her father “could write excellent angrezi (English) left to right and write very fast, and that during the era of Bade Baba, a maulvi would come and bless the first writing of the child with a Bismillah” (*Gour*, 13). The pen goes through the Hindu and Muslim hands; its materiality is against the sectarian divisions; the children force on them. The writings of Mehru Apa about Lucknowi food, parathas with 64 layers, pulao anardana with pomegranate-red and white grains, the mythical Maash ki dal that restored a shrivelled shrub, create an edible “kshetra” where foodstuffs and methods move across communities without any restrictions. When Mehru Apa prepares meat for the first time in the kitchen of Amma, the deed is transgressive (Vaishnava family does not eat meat) and at the same time, one of celebration; “For every woman is twice born,” she said, ‘once when she emerges from her mother’s womb and once when she comes of age.’” (*Gour*, 92).

The menstrual blood that signifies the transformation of Rekha into a woman is mixed with the blood of the butcher who killed the animal, and they are both sanctified with the

cooking of Mehru Apa. Their dinner, kabooli pulao and korma, is an amalgamation of Persian, Mughal and Avadhi, none of which can be traced to a single religious source (*Gour, 91*). Even the religious practices cross over into each other. The novel starts with the shrine of Ghazi Mian, who was not a saint but a soldier in the army of Mahmud Ghaznavi, but whom poor people in our section of the country believed was the protector of our cows. The syncretism is materialized in ritual (*Gour, 66*). The sister of a Muslim saint is given a Hindu name; a Hindu girl mocks her about it to her Muslim friend. Mehru Apa later informs that her family took care of the Chhatreshwari Devi Temple, where the Hindu priest was placed, and they got special paintings of Ramchandra-ji and the boatman (*Gour, 95*). She has already authored a book on the conception of Ramchandra-ji as Imam-e-Hind by Iqbal and another book on the Urdu translation of your Gayatri mantra by Iqbal (*Gour, 95-96*). “kshetra”, according to the argument of Das and Tripathi, is not the place of undifferentiated homogeneity but of shared experiences, beliefs, religious practices and traditions as extensions of the postcolonial ethos (*Das and Tripathi, 392*). But Gour will not have nostalgia. The “kshetra” is threatened, not only by the exterior violence that it is subjected to, but also by its internal weakness. When the child Rekha fastens a rakhi on the wrists of Danish-bhai, she is carrying out a Hindu brotherhood ritual on a Muslim boy who will later on become her lover; “The rakhi, crafted of red hand-spun thread wrapped throughout some grains of rice in a small piece of yellow cloth” (*Gour, 82*), is a palimpsestic symbol that inscribes fraternal relation within the Hindu cultural tradition, it later acquires the emotional complexity of forbidden intimacy that expose the instability of fixed social identities. The “kshetra” is not a paradise fallen but a rare accomplishment, which is sustained by toil and is liable to loss at any moment.

Invisible Ink reconstructs coexistence as an *ethical practice of inhabiting space*, continually negotiated through ordinary interactions that precede ideological categorization. Allahabad's *kshetra* therefore functions neither as a monument to communal harmony nor as

an archive of inevitable conflict; instead, it exists as what can be described as an ‘*ethical ecology of relationality*’, where diverse religious communities play constant roles in the co-construction of common social spaces. In this context, the originality of Gour's intervention becomes particularly evident in the light of Homi K. Bhabha's conception of the “*Third Space*.” Bhabha argues that cultural identities are not produced within fixed civilizational boundaries but emerge through spaces of negotiation, translation and hybridity in which apparently different traditions meet each other (*Bhabha* 54–56). Identity, from this viewpoint, is always relational it never has an essential aspect. Gour's Allahabad is an example of such a third space, but also extends Bhabha's formulation in important respects. While Bhabha mostly theorizes hybridity as a reaction to colonial discourse, *Invisible Ink* shows that the co-existence of the Hindu-Muslim develops out of much older histories of neighbourhood intimacy, shared ritual practices, linguistic exchange, and everyday reciprocity which transcend colonial and nationalist framework equally. The city, thus becomes a site where identities are continually co-produced through ordinary life rather than inherited as unchangeable religious categories. At its deepest level, *Invisible Ink* proposes that syncretism is not a cultural residue of the history but a contemporary epistemological practice. In Gour's hands, the term syncretism is not used in the sense of “coexistence of religions” or “fusion of traditions into a uniform identity”. Instead, it is a form of knowing, remembering and living in the world that recognizes plurality without demanding assimilation.

Gender Space and Body Archive

Another unique thing about *Invisible Ink* is that it maintains its focus on gendered space, unlike most of the communal violence stories; “De Quincey’s palimpsest continually tends to escape its circumscribed province of the mind, expanding its materiality into the realm ...” (*Weng*, 13). *Invisible Ink* is not just about communal memory; it questions who possesses the authority to remember, whose memories become historical knowledge, and through which

bodies, the history continues to survive after political violence has subsided. In doing so, it challenges the traditional archive of the nation-state and proposes an alternative historiography based on in female subjectivity, domestic memory, and embodied experience. *Rekha* is not just a narrator of *communal history but also the living archive, whose body, memory, and consciousness preserve forms of historical knowledge systematically excluded from official narratives*. According to Michel Foucault, archives are not neutral spaces of knowledge but are indeed spaces of power that control the legitimate memory and what must remain invisible (*Foucault 128–31*). Historical memory is therefore produced not by objective preservation but by the process of inclusion/exclusion. Gour's novel reveals such exclusions by shifting the locus of historical remembrance from the state to women's everyday lives.

The structure of the novel is layered into the vertical courtyard (public, female-controlled, visible to the neighbours), the terrace (personal, shared by the households) and the locked upstairs room (secret, where the dangerous guest Mehru Apa is incarcerated) (*Gour, 10–11*). The courtyard therefore embodies what Homi Bhabha conceptualizes as the "*Third Space*," a site of negotiation where identities emerge relationally rather than through fixed cultural boundaries (*Bhabha 55–56*). The room is a palimpsest of women's lives, and they all left their mark on it, which can never be removed by the next ones. Even the body itself is an archive. When Rekha is having her first menstruation, her mother is giving birth, and the confusion of bloods, the blood of birth, the blood of the moon, the blood of the butcher, later on, the blood of violence, form a somatic palimpsest, which Mehru Apa takes to mean empowerment; "*Do not be ashamed of this blood, bitiya. This is magic blood, the blood which nourishes life*" (*Gour, 86*). But here is power, and it is a vice.

Invisible Ink, thus participates in what feminist historiography has long identified as the recovery of "*history from below*." Yet Gour extends this project beyond simply recovering forgotten women. Rather than adding female voices to an already existing historical narrative,

she fundamentally transforms the very *epistemology of history*. History no longer appears as a sequence of public events but as an accumulation of emotional, sensory, and interpersonal experiences transmitted through domestic relationships. This transformation resonates strongly with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of historiography in "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" where she argues that dominant historical discourse systematically silences marginalized voices by translating them into the conceptual language of institutional power (Spivak 271–75). Women frequently appear within nationalist histories only as symbolic figures representing honour, sacrifice, or cultural continuity rather than as producers of historical knowledge themselves. As Rekha subsequently bleeds due to the violence done on her during the assault on Mehru Apa, it is the blood that previously signified her entrance into the world of womanhood that signifies her entrance into the world of communal trauma. The scars on her body of the violent birth and the fresh wound of the attack are the deep forces imprints of a violent life before and after awareness; her physical marks become the palimpsestic writings. Gour resists this symbolic appropriation by presenting Rekha not as an allegory of the nation but as an epistemic subject whose memories actively generate alternative forms of historical understanding. The "invisible ink" signifies not simply forgotten history but histories *inscribed upon bodies whose experiences have never entered institutional memory*. Women's lives become manuscripts written in forms that conventional historiography cannot easily decipher.

Purdah is also explored in the novel, adding complexity to the gendered archive; “No one must see these,” she cautioned. ‘We women must observe purdah for these functions of our bodies, with these stained kerchiefs and with our hearts and feelings too’ ...” (Gour, 87). When negotiations for marriage between Danish-bhai and Amina begin, her mother insists she follow purdah in front of her husband, transforming the cousin, who was like a brother, into a potential groom; “... the only thing behind this unequal distribution of fates was the burqa!”

(*Gour*, 69).

Purdah, covering the female body against the male gaze, here, serves as a technology of keeping the community limits; it deters the carefree sex between Rekha and Danish that enabled them to build their relationship. However, transgression is also made possible through the burqa. Burqa through the reductive binaries that frequently dominate contemporary political discourse such as oppression versus liberation, tradition versus modernity, or religion versus secularism; Gour represents the burqa as a *palimpsestic cultural object*, whose meanings have accumulated through successive historical, political, emotional, and interpersonal inscriptions without replacing one another. The girls wear burqas when sneaking to Miss Leslie Clarke’s beauty parlour to avoid recognition. The veil that covers females enables females to enjoy the freedom to move around spaces that would be restricted. This ambivalence is carried on in the burqa of the adult Amina. When she arrives, she is wearing a long black burqa, but underneath it, she is intelligent, albeit plump, in slim-fitted trousers and a white polo-necked sweater with fashionable patch pockets (*Gour*, 64).

Amina makes a joke when Rekha questions her about the reason as to why she wears the burqa, “it’s better than sunscreen”. However, the humour conceals a more intricate fact that is the best aspects of a burqa: “I can go ahead and wear all the clothes I dreamt of wearing but couldn’t because Abbu-Amami would’ve scalped me” (*Gour*, 64). The burqa turns into a palimpsest of incompatible demands, the conservatism of religious modesty, individual style, defence against the sun and eye and, as the novel cynically hints, defence against the world, which has become murderously hostile to visible Muslim identity.

Representing Violence and the Problem of Representation

Unlike many narratives of Partition and postcolonial communal conflict that organize their structures around spectacular scenes of bloodshed, physical brutality, and mass

displacement. *Gour develops an ethics of literary representation that refuses voyeuristic consumption of suffering and instead foregrounds the invisible, affective, and relational consequences of communal violence.* The politics of representing violence has long occupied a central position within trauma studies. Since the publication of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, scholars have argued that traumatic events resist direct representation because trauma exceeds immediate comprehension and returns belatedly through fragmented memory, repetition, silence, and involuntary recollection (*Caruth 4–11*). In this, Trauma is not merely a painful event but a crisis of representation which ‘*language*’ repeatedly fails to capture experiences that remain psychically unresolved.

Invisible Ink does not depict violence against people in a community. The riots, which desecrate the Allahabad “*kshetra*”, unfold in the background and are conveyed through fragments of burnt notebooks, blood on the floor, the kidnapping of Mehru Apa, broken fingers, the court proceedings, and the neighbours’ silence. As Freigang notes in her analysis of narratives of post-Partition violence, authors grapple with the dilemma posed by representing violence in general and trauma specifically, and many resort to aesthetic means to depict the unspeakable (*Freigang, 8*). Gour aims to depict violence through its residues, the residual traces left behind when it has been erased. These traces are most devastating, with the bloody floor being the most dreadful, which Rekha and Amma have to scrub off. Following the kidnapping of Mehru Apa, “... Slippers lying misaligned on the ground. Hair oil and comb, the hair oil spilt all over the floor. And on the floor, itself, beside her prayer mat, a large, shapeless, pooled bloodstain” (*Gour, 129*). They do not feel guilty but rather clean; “*My mother watched me with an expression that I could not quite read then, but which to my memory now seems oddly like respect. With her left hand, she helped me tear up the bedsheet in half. I wet it with water from the bucket and began painfully swabbing the floor. Together we drenched the large, drying stain, Amma pouring water over it while I scrubbed it, lifted it*

in my mop and wrung it into the bucket. It seemed to go on forever.” (Gour, 129)

Invisible Ink elaborates on Meheru Apa’s homesickness. Violence is framed as housework, the endless gendered labour of eliminating trauma. The blood, which shall not be washed out, is a palimpsest of its own, Mehru Apa’s suffering visible in the brown water of the bucket, damp-sweaty on the long-fleece fingers. The simile of scrubbing encapsulates the novel’s central theme, the fear of the residue of violence that one tries to erase, only to find that one cannot even remember it; “*Remember – you tumbled down the stairs and hit your head against the stone rail there*” (Gour, 126) is an injunction Amma uses to replace the palimpsest with a formal, no-lose account. Gour constructs silence as an interpretive space when examined through the lens of *communal memory* within which readers actively reconstruct suppressed histories. What remains unsaid in institutional archives becomes central within the novel. Readers must become historians of absence, recovering meanings concealed beneath ordinary conversations and domestic routines. Silence, therefore preserves forms of historical continuity that communal politics seeks to erase.

Writing the unspeakable, Gour denies the survival tactic that Amma needs to erase. According to the letter of Amma by his sister-in-law, Kusumlata, this is how fast communal violence turns into communal discourse, how trauma is re-scripted into scandal and strange rumours have been spread. The communal riot violence is blurred in violent shunings of the family, both are effective in eliminating relationships that once defined the “kshetra”. Also, additional complications concerning the place of Danish-bhai in the fate of Mehru Apa in the novel. Danish, enraged by Mehru Apa's humiliation at his hands, “... *he carried her letter to some hardline clerics*” (Gour, 147). However, it was also Danish who, after the violence got out of control, was able to remove her from it; he placed her on an “ikka” and offered her outside a hospital in Kanpur (Gour, 147). The betraying, also, is the rescuing hand; the inciting letter also, perhaps, holds that truth which can be used to affect a rescue. Danish is neither

villain nor hero but a tragically self-interested person: his behaviour is a palimpsest of conflicting motives upon which no single judgment is sufficient.

Invisible Ink does not allow catharsis. Mehru Apa lives on, the news of her demise is a relief to both Rekha and Amma, of her death as a ninety-one-year-old activist in London, but it is remote, intangible, and cannot help repair the horror of that night. The life of Rekha is an irreversible failure she never goes back to school, turns into a seamstress just like her mother and bears the trauma on her body and her sleeplessness. The phone call, which could bring her back to Danish, which could, as Amina desperately thinks, give some sort of termination repair, is interrupted by silence; someone did call on the line, but no voice came through (*Gour, 154*). The novel does not end but rings out with the unanswered connection, a palm-scribe of what could have been said, which has been over-scribed with the unspeakable.

Conclusion

Gour's *Invisible Ink* fundamentally reorients contemporary literary engagements with communal violence by shifting critical attention from conflict to layered and ethical practices of coexistence. Rather than reproducing the dominant historiographical narrative in which Hindu-Muslim relations are understood primarily through episodes of violence, the novel constructs an alternative archive grounded in friendship, domestic intimacy, embodied memory, and continuity of everyday life. Friendship in *Invisible Ink* functions not as sentimental reconciliation but as a counter-historiographical practice that resists communal essentialism. In this sense, Gour rewrites the grammar of Hindu-Muslim relations by replacing the historiography of antagonism with an ethics of relational continuity. The metaphor of the palimpsest, inherited from Thomas De Quincey's reflections on layered inscription, is transformed in *Invisible Ink* into a comprehensive narrative method that reveals the persistence of erased yet never extinguished histories beneath the visible surface of communal discourse (*De Quincey 141–45*).

Through its representation of gendered embodiment as historical testimony; it proposed the concept of the somatic archive to describe the ways in which Rekha's body preserves communal history beyond the limits of institutional documentation. Engaging with Cathy Caruth's account of trauma, which demonstrated that trauma in *Invisible Ink* is neither solely psychological nor exclusively linguistic (*Caruth 4–10*). Instead, memory is materially inscribed within bodily experience, domestic practice, and gendered spatiality. Women's labour, ritual performance, caregiving, and affective relationships preserve forms of historical continuity that remain largely invisible within official archives. The *burqa*, similarly, emerges as a palimpsestic object whose layered meanings expose the inadequacy of binary interpretations that reduce Muslim womanhood either to oppression or resistance. Instead, Gour reveals clothing and domesticity as dynamic sites where cultural memory is continually negotiated.

Invisible Ink offers a profound intervention concerning the representation of violence. Unlike narratives that rely upon spectacular depictions of communal brutality, Gour deliberately resists transforming suffering into visual consumption. Violence is represented primarily through its long-term consequences: fractured trust, altered neighbourhoods, interrupted conversations, and transformed emotional landscapes. Yet Gour locates historical knowledge within silence itself. Here, silence functions not as absence of narrative but as an alternative archive through which submerged histories remain available to attentive readers. It can be taught together with theoretical readings about memory, postcolonialism, and gender, it can also be read together with other communal histories of violence like those made by Freigang and Carthy; it can be the subject of a case study within the existing literary studies of space which Das and Tripathi developed on the notion of “kshetra”.

At the end of the novel, *Invisible Ink*, the narrator acquires a reflective view upon the state in which Rekha and her friend stand: “*We are ordinary people, no heroes. We were appalled. We were frightened. We shuddered and called on our God – or gods – and said ah,*

poor souls, poor, poor blameless souls. This is all wrong. This should never have happened. This must not happen again. We are shamed in our humanity. But we too have bled. Invisible, innocent, unredeemed blood. We are in this together” (Gour, 154). The speaker involves herself in the accusation; the we who were scared and did not take any action is the “we” who moved the blood, too. The image that is presented at the end of the novel, the phone call that is never answered, the silence in the line is the silence of hope rather than of desolation. It is still possible that someone will speak. The obscure still can be deciphered. It is that attention with which Invisible Ink works and to which it leaves an heir to its readers.

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