

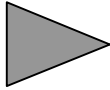
**GENDERED VIOLENCE IN THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE FICTION
BY AUTHORS OF SOUTH-ASIAN ORIGIN**

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Abstract

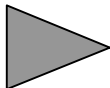
*This article aims to analyse gendered instances of violence, as they are described in a number of novels written in English by authors of South-Asian origin, among which *Shame*, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, *Shalimar the Clown*, *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* by Meera Syal, *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali, or *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. Institutional violence against women includes rape, *sutee/sati* (the ritual of self-immolation of Hindu women at the death of their husbands), wearing the Islamic symbol of *burqa*, or keeping women in *purdah* (Muslim women's confinement to the private sphere). In the case of men, the best known is male circumcision for Muslims or the male sterilisation campaign in the Emergency period in India. The trans-gendered body is also explored, with an emphasis on the *hijras* in India, men who undergo a castration ceremony in order to become guardians of women or artists.*

Keywords: gendered violence, postcolonial novel, hybridity, trans-gendered identity



Introduction

Specific sex/gender violent experiences in the postcolonial context with an emphasis on the South-Asian space can be discussed for females (such as rape, *sutee/sati* as the ritual of self-immolation of Hindu women at the death of their husbands); males (circumcision, sterilization under the state of Emergency in India) or the trans-gendered identities of the *hijras* in India. They are highly circumscribed to religious violations of the self, more often than not done within the family.



Institutional violence against women

Rape as institutional gendered violence has been mentioned before in connection with war, where from the point of view of the perpetrators it is enacted as a justifiable act of power imposition. In a symbolic interpretation it is a violation of the mother country. Homosexual rape is ironically described as an unpatriotic act of opposing the state's economic interests in *Shame*, when a team of engineers is prevented by the locals to build butane mines (Cf. Rushdie 1983: 91). Raza Hyder is asked to provide military escort to a second team of gas engineers, and rape is again present, this time provoked by the military to the civilian population (Cf. Rushdie 1983: 98). The rape of a local girl by three village brothers and the tragic effects this had on her person is depicted in detail in *Shalimar the Clown*, as well as the violent unsuccessful attempted capturing of the assailants by the village men (Cf. Rushdie 2006: 126-127). In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, rape is described as an instrument of blackmail and intimidation, a young woman journalist is raped and beaten because of the news of corruption she published (Cf. Rushdie 2000: 246). Offered the choice of leaving India, she refuses; the comparison Rushdie makes, between India and a violent husband, is relevant in the context, India is "corrupt and crooked and heartless and violent (...). There are noble women who remain married to coarse wife-beaters for similar reasons. They see the good in their bad men" (Rushdie 2000: 246).

Obliging women to wear the Islamic symbol of *burqa* is construed in *Shalimar the Clown* as another symbolic gendered violation, this time imposed by the so-called militants for self-determination. Together with *purdah* (women's confinement to the private sphere), it is a religious instrument of disciplining and controlling women. In the case of Kashmiri women, they were reluctant to obey the orders first

(“Kashmiri women were mostly unaccustomed to the veil and ignored the posters”. Rushdie 2006: 277). Then they either accepted under violence (“Women teachers were doused with acid for failing to adhere to the Islamic dress code. Threats were made and deadlines issued and many Kashmiri women put on, for the first time the shroud their mothers or grandmothers had always proudly refused”. Rushdie 2006: 277) or resisted the psychological and physical terror with which the imposition of *burqa* is accompanied (“How can a woman’s face be the enemy of Islam?” (...)) So because men are animals, according to them, women must pay”, says Firdaus Noman, Shalimar’s mother, then she is ordered to undress, which she defiantly does, followed by the other village women. Rushdie 2006: 301-302). Finally, when India/Kashmir visits her mother country all the women were veiled, therefore fear prevailed.

The veil is extensively used in *Midnight’s Children* and it is loaded symbolically: it is the *burqa* of women’s invisibility or the bridal veil, the perforated sheet through which Saleem’s grandfather examines his future wife and tries to find ailments for her real or imaginary illnesses; it is the curtain or veil through which Jamila, Saleem’s sister, is allowed to perform in public, or the symbolical veil of a brain tumour. Lifting the veil is in the novel the symbol of modernization, Aadam asks his young wife to go out of *purdah*, which for him also equals a new national identity: “Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman” (Rushdie 1984: 35). In *Shame*, *purdah* is treated also as a choice women can make for themselves: Bilquis decides to take the veil, which is metaphorically explained by herself – “It was getting too cold, so I wanted to draw the curtains” (Rushdie 1983: 208), and gets into the habit of stitching black cloth together to make burial shrouds. Eventually these will bring her husband’s salvation: followed by their political enemies, Raza and Omar escape dressed in *burqas*, “the head-to-toe cloaks of invisibility, veils” (Rushdie 1983: 262). The living dead, as well as the gender images are used by Rushdie to portray the decadent and powerless stage in which he places the character of Raza Hyder: “The living wear shrouds as well as the dead” (Rushdie 1983: 262), he is “unmanned by wife-sewn veils” (Rushdie 1983: 268). Symbolically, Bilquis is the instrument of his escape, but the change that she provokes (“Your son became a daughter (...), so now you must change shape also” (Rushdie 1983: 262) is the one that will eventually trigger his violent death, again symbolically inflicted by a woman, one of Omar’s (and of his brother previously killed by Raza, Babar’s) three mothers, Bunny. Her words, “There is no shame in killing you now, because you are a dead man anyway. It is only the execution of a corpse” (Rushdie 1983: 281), close down a cycle of violent deaths, which more or less bear the mark of shame, the notion around which the multiple plots of the novel revolve. In fact, “shame” (or its Arabic equivalent, “sharam”) is the meaningful feeling which provokes some other of the violent gendered actions of the novel. For instance, Little Mir conducted a punitive riot against the family home of Iskander Harappa, where his wife Rani had retreated in the private sphere (a sort of *purdah*) because of the fight the two of them had had over another woman; while his men looted the house, he proudly

declared: “A man’s honour is in his women” (Rushdie 1983: 96), which made Rani feel “ashamed” (Cf. Rushdie 1983: 97) and unable to tell her husband about the attack. Similarly, Bilquis’s alleged lover (and Sufyia’s alleged father) is found knifed dead in the street, violently killed presumably by Raza or at his orders: “the genitals had been severed and inserted into the rectum. The head was never found, nor was the murderer brought to justice” (Rushdie 1983: 103). Both the highly symbolical punishment and Bilquis’s conviction about the mental illness of her daughter Sufyia “She is my shame” (Rushdie 1983: 101) lead to the conclusion that this episode parallels the British one, which Rushdie claims was the core and the starting point of this novel: a Pakistani father murdered his daughter for the alleged crime of making love to a white boy; by this she “had brought such dishonour upon her family that only her blood could wash away the stain” (Rushdie 1983: 115). Rushdie’s own comments as narrator are relevant for their interpretation; the culture gap between the Western and the Eastern societies indicates what otherwise would appear to be an unthinkable act:

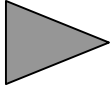
We who have grown up on a diet of honour and shame can still grasp what must seem unthinkable to peoples living in the aftermath of the death of God and of tragedy: that men will sacrifice their dearest love on the implacable altars of their pride (Rushdie 1983: 115)

In the same vein, of cultural differences between the Western and the Eastern worlds, *sati* is described in *Midnight’s Children* (as by Spivak and Chakravarti) as an outside (imperial) intrusion in the Hindu family life, an alteration of the local order of things by the imposition of the colonial law, which tries to trigger “evolution” and “civilization”. *Sati/sutee* is placed by Gayatri Spivak within a discourse of colonial critique and connected to the issue of the subaltern learning to speak (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Nelson and Grossberg, 1988: 295-305). In order to “unlearn” the female privilege and to learn to speak, rather than listen to or speak for, the postcolonial intellectual must also learn to articulate the ideological formation by measuring silences into the object of the investigation, because to ignore the subaltern today is a continuation of the imperialist project. *Sati*, the Hindu widow’s sacrifice is presented from the point of view of the colonial subject as a signifier with the reverse social change, an important proof of women’s conformity to older norms at a time when these norms had become shaky within. On the contrary, the imperialist image of an establisher of good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind. The sentence “White men are saving brown women from brown men”, according to Spivak, “indicates a collective fantasy symptomatic of a collective itinerary of sadomasochistic repression in a collective imperialistic enterprise” (Nelson, Grossberg, 1988: 296). The ban of *sati*, reflective of its leap from private life into public life coincided with a changeover from a mercantile and commercial to a territorial and administrative British presence, therefore, more than a preoccupation with the situation of women, it shows a political and economic strategy of the Empire. In “Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi*. Orientalism, Nationalism, and

a Script for the Past” (Sangari, Vaid, 1990: 27-87), Uma Chakravarti tackles the issue of *sati* at the intersection between the Indian view upon the past as a carrier of popular beliefs, mythology, tales of heroism and folklore and the imperialistic view of the same past. *Sati* is only one point in her attempt to demonstrate how the myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood, as located in the Vedic period, has come to be shared by Hindus nowadays as a symbol of a historical consciousness. This image foregrounded the Aryan woman (the progenitor of the upper-caste woman) and simultaneously destroyed the image of the Vedic *dasi* (woman in servitude). The British colonial image of the *sati* exemplified both the role of the “faithful widow” and a model of a barbaric society. They emphasized the mystique of the Hindu woman who “voluntarily” and “cheerfully” mounted the pyre of her husband (Sangari, Vaid, 1990: 31). The Indian perspective contained a highly intellectual argument: the goal for women as exemplified by the ancient Hindu legislators was “devotion to the husband”. But the ultimate goal for all Hindus was “selfless absorption in a divine essence”, a union which could not flow from an action like *sati*. Therefore at an intellectual level there is the refusal to accept that the final goal of Hindu women was different from that of Hindu men. *Sati* was one of the three elements that triggered off the beginnings of cultural nationalism in the 1830’s: “one was the attack of the Utilitarians and Anglicists of Hindu civilization; the second was the perceived threat of the Christian missionaries, and the third was the abolition of *sati*, which was perceived as an intrusion into the Hindu family, the most sacred sphere of Hindu society” (Sangari, Vaid, 1990: 36). Accordingly, *Midnight’s Children* presents a home for widows, who found in it a replacement for dutiful death:

[The widows,] understanding that their true lives ended with the death of their husbands, but no longer permitted to seek the release of sati, come to the holy city to pass their worthless days in heartfelt ululations. In the palace of the widows lives a tribe of women whose chests are irremediably bruised by the power of their continual pummellings, whose hair is torn beyond repair, and whose voices are shredded by the constant, keeping expressions of their grief (Rushdie 1984: 417)

Re-naming, and in this way re-inventing women is another way of applying aggressive gender tactics; it is described twice in *Midnight’s Children*, in one of the instances it also involves religious redefinition of oneself. The change of name (from Mumtaz Aziz into Amina Sinai), and a second marriage after the first, unconsummated one, to poet Nadir Khan, brings along the symbolic start of a new life; this time the superimposition of the categories of “father” (creator) over that of “husband” lead to a muddled identity and a Oedipian confusion of relationships: Dr. Aziz passes Amina up to her new husband after the dowry, “into the care of this man who had re-named and so re-invented her, thus becoming in a sense her father as well as her new husband” (Rushdie 1984: 67). In the same way, Parvati changes her name and converts to Islam: she “became a new person in order to have a child” (Rushdie 1984: 401).



Violence against men - male bonding and inclusion

A typically male (and more specifically Muslim male) violent experience described in novels by South-Asian authors is circumcision (also present in its female version). It is thoroughly analysed by Deepak Mehta in “Circumcision, Body, Masculinity. The Ritual Wound and Collective Violence” (Das, Kleinman et al., 2000: 79-101), and placed in India at the intersection of the Muslim and Hindu communities. Mehta looks at how the male body is constituted, eclipsed, and reformulated in three related domains: 1) constituted through the ritual of circumcision called *khatna*; 2) effaced under a series of verbal signs, signified by the term *musalmani*; 3) recreated as an alternate imagination of the body emerging from the fact of being circumcised, seen in the significance of the term *katua* (to cut). The ritual of circumcision itself is described at the intersection of the physical sign, inscribed on the body, and its verbalized act in the community, the conversations about it:

In the ritual of circumcision the body is willed and represented so that it enters the domestic group and the community of Islam at the same time. The ritual conceives of circumcision as an eternal truth individuated on every male body. It thus describes the body's metaphysic. This metaphysic constitutes masculinity and a “correct” sexuality by establishing a unity between the spiritual and the corporeal, male and female (...). These (everyday) conversations do not privilege the bodies of male actors, but of the entire community, considered as a singularity. In the process of constituting the male community, such conversations substitute a collective body for the individual one. This substitution is achieved, first, by showing how the pain of the circumcision operation is distributed over every male of the community. Each male must bear this pain and witness it in another. Second, the conversations establish a fundamental difference between Muslims and Hindus. Both the ritual and everyday conversations show the power of circumcision to fabricate individual bodies (the ritual) and communities (everyday conversations). (Das, Kleinman et al., 2000: 80)

According to Mehta, during collective violence between Hindus and Muslims, the terms *khatna* and *musalmani* are suspended and replaced by *katua*, which privileges the wound, but as a stigmatized mark of identity of the other. It refers to Muslim males, but also to castration, which suggests an inadequate male, and is used in times of disorder by non-Muslims to refer to Muslim males. From the point of view of the speaker, it indicates a violation, the idea that Muslim males are less than human. In terms of the origins of the body *khatna* and *musalmani* imagine it as being located in a time of making, whereas *katua* emphasizes a time of destroying, it “gives the temporal essence of menace a deferred but inevitable

aggression” (Das, Keinman et al., 2000: 80). The question to ask is in which ways circumcision as a mark of identity shapes and alters the destiny of individuals and of groups. Mehta suggests that there is a potential of collective violence (through wounding) to create (found in the ritual and the everyday) and destroy, the actors’ experiences of violence are translated into either “a sense of community” or the abrogation of “what makes them human”.

The ritual, as described and analyzed by Mehta, has a triadic classification of the male body into a depth, a surface and a celestial height; its signature on the body of the novice is unfolded through bi-unity. First this is found in the combination of male and female, through blood and milk, in primarily a “gestural” medium. Secondly, in a verbal and “gestural” medium, it shows how the body is socially posited and is impressed by three types of signs. And finally, in a primarily verbal medium, the mark of the other (the domestic group and the word of God) is stamped on the body. The depth is represented by emissions that are polluting and dangerous, and must therefore be controlled. In the height the Muslim finds the words of God; he must always ascend or descend to the surface to claim his new status. The surface is a kind of frontier available in a series of signs, primarily the young men’s sexuality, laying down an acceptable and accepted mode of behaviour. The fluid elements and substances emitted by the physical body and enacted on its surface are the clear marks of a presence of the other, which is “an a priori structure of the possible”, “a distillation of time by which the rhythms of the body are broken into units”, but also through the recitation of prayers into the novice’s ears during circumcision, the other has a teophanic nature, who emerges from a celestial height” (Cf. Das, Keinman et al., 2000: 88-89). The prayer has three dimensions, since it has three postures of the body built into it: the erect stance of the mother and child (draped over by the green cloth, after the cut is performed, with the blood of the boy on the mother’s breast – blood and milk), the descending movement of the child’s blood, the burial of the prepuce under the nuptial bed.

What is the body composed of after the ritual has been enacted? With its depth, it is constitutive of emissions that are to be purified and controlled. With a celestial height, the body is suffused with the world of God. And with a regime of signs playing on its surface, the body recognizes the presence of the other. This surface (...) is the communion of the body with its other, evidenced through vision (shuhud). (Das, Keinman et al., 2000: 89)

Mehta then proceeds to the second act of circumcision: its everyday re-enactment through male discourse on witnessing it. In this everyday discourse of circumcision the body becomes invisible, it is absented in two ways: the ritual wound is imbued with an incorporeal value, while the body is seen as the appendage of the community. *Musalmani* is linked to the recognition of pain, which in turn is associated with spirituality and subsequently becomes part of the belief of the

group. This empowers the *Musalman* and distinguishes him from the Hindu. *Musalmani* is also linked with removal of bodily impurities, it links the pure body to the reading of the Qua'ran. Each speaker has the ability to speak on behalf of the whole community. The community itself is framed in two ways: by separating itself from the Hindu community and by linking it to concepts such as belief, strength, removal of bodily impurity (Das, Keinman et al., 2000: 93). The community is formed by males who had been through the same ritual and who then at some point in their lives, had been asked to witness the ritual of circumcision being performed on somebody else – a feeling of brotherhood arises only after this act of witnessing has been performed, and this feeling is made valid by the claim in membership to the community of Islam. In making this claim, the speakers invoke Islam, and

in this invocation, the material properties of the sign are replaced by a discourse which talks of belief and pain. The replacement of the embodied sign by the discourse of the musalmani is evident in the establishment of a collective memory. In describing the common thread that binds one circumcised body to another, the speakers attach a retrospective ordering to the ritual. This ordering transforms individual bodies into a communal body. (Das, Keinman et al., 2000: 94)

The body occupies two dimensions: the corporeal and the imagined (at the moment of its making it is embossed with a future). The link between pain and wounding institutes the imagination of the *musalmani*, and with the ritual we find an imagination that is projected on the physical surface of the body. The act of wounding is willed and legitimated by restoring the body to the community, and simultaneously the wound constitutes the metaphysical body. It is interesting to see how Mehta places the ritual of circumcision on a temporal axis; the body is a just vessel through which the pre-existing wound is enacted. The relationship between the social and the spiritual principles is a relationship between the everyday and the ritual, and they have an existence beyond the individual one:

In linking musalmani with pain and prayer, the speakers constitute the future and past as unlimited. For the speakers, the community must exist for all time, and every wound must recreate that existence. Each speaker, it is true, bears the wound within its body, but the power of the wound and its linking with pain is such that the body is invited into it. In this sense the wound exists before the speaker. He is born to embody it. Thus, both the ritual and the conversations show how the whole body exchanges its organic will for a social and spiritual one. (Das, Keinman et al., 2000: 95)

Mehta continues his analysis of circumcision by showing how, during occasions of communal violence, the relationship between circumcision and society is incapable of sustaining the meanings found in *khatna* and *musalmani*. Instead *katua* is used to designate the Muslim male. In fact, this term is not only used in sectarian conflicts,

but also in everyday conversations by non-Muslims to designate Muslims. It is situated within an ensemble of representations which stereotype the other as dirty and animal-like (because dangerous as a dog and productive as a bull). The wound thus is also regarded as stigma. As a discourse, *katua* is directed towards a violation of the body. For Muslims themselves this term signifies a loss to the extent that circumcision is a memory, a deformation, and also it engraves the signs of being Muslim on the body (Das, Keinman et al., 2000: 99).

Circumcision is present in *Shame* in two instances: once as prominent absence and the second time as joke. Omar Khayyam, born of three mothers and no known father has another exceptional life experience; “certain irregularities” preceded and succeeded his birth (Rushdie 1983: 21), the former had to do with his conception and the apparent pregnancy and delivery by all the three sisters, and the latter with the denial of Islamic rituals; in another self-made ritual the three mothers explain to him their lack of religious devotion:

‘I refused completely,’ his eldest mother Chhunni told him on his seventh birthday, ‘to whisper the name of God into your ear’. On his eighth birthday, middle-Munnee confided: ‘There was no question of shaving your head (...)’. Exactly one year later, his youngest mother adopted a stern expression: ‘Under no circons, ‘Bunny announced, ‘would I have permitted the foreskin to be removed. What is this idea? It is not like banana peel’ (Rushdie 1983: 21)

Rushdie’s ironic comments (“Omar Khayyam Shakil entered life without benefit of mutilation, barbery or divine approval. There are many who would consider this a handicap”. Rushdie 1983: 21) draw attention on the one hand to his own belief in the futility of these religious rituals, and on the other hand on their importance for the Muslim community at large.

The other episode referring to circumcision involves Omar’s brother, Babar, born in the same surreal and absurd circumstances (i.e. no father was known, instead, he had three mothers bearing and delivering him) and is at the second and third levels of Mehta’s interpretation, the verbalised ritualistic body. The joke involves Raza Hyder, nicknamed Old Razor Guts, who will later give the order of Babar’s killing, and it involves the fun made at the emasculation presumably done by mistake at his circumcision ritual, at the same time a prediction of Raza’s future killing by Babar’s mothers in the religiously devout women’s attire. In an ironical way, the ritual of coming into manliness gone wrong creates the image of the despised inferior woman:

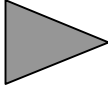
- Listen, yaar, you know when children get circumcised the circumciser speaks holy words? – Yah, man, I know. – Then what did he say when he did the cut on Old Razor Guts? – I don’t know, what what? – Just one word only, yaar, one word and

he got thrown out of the house! – God, must have been a bad word, man, come on, tell. – This was it, sir: ‘Oops.’ (Rushdie 1983: 130)

Although not usually an issue, female circumcision is present in *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, where it provokes a cultural incident and leads to the separation of the University Women's Group one of the protagonists was a member of in her student days. The black Nigerian Yaba, a member of the royal family in her country, had a violent controversy over this issue with Angela, the group white protest coordinator, whose position towards the issue of female circumcision was only of partial condemnation, as it could also be construed as a “very ancient and precious custom which we're just too white to understand. Like nose piercing” (Syal, 2000: 88). The description of the episode is done with a touch of subtle humour towards the momentary extremism of otherwise perfectly legitimate feminist policies: “Yaba threw some furniture and likened Angela to a portion of the female anatomy, which in other circumstances might have been an attempt to reclaim a rude word, and in this instance was just rude” (Syal, 2000: 88). Yaba supplemented the violent meaning of her action with more words, meant to underline the clash, this time constructed along racial lines (“black” was imagined as the superior race in students' and intellectual circles – “Anybody who was not white was given the honorary title”. Syal, 2000: 87) and raised the added questions of the presupposed cultural superiority of the West, which she denies with the help of the historical and of the cultural and truth ownership arguments:

Our ancestors were living in cities with drainage systems while they were still shitting in caves. They ain't got no culture, which is why they're trying to own ours. What makes you think they know the answers, huh? (Syal, 2000: 88)

The same issues are raised later in the novel, at a women's reunion of protest against domestic violence “imagined” by the British multicultural society as cultural crimes. They challenge the too permissive in their opinion British state, which in the desire to celebrate the different cultures of the ethnic minorities living on its territory, fall into the mistake of accepting deeds that are against the universal human rights. One of the stories is of a South-Asian woman who legally separated from her husband after twelve years of marriage, and was given custody of their two children; not accepting the situation, her former husband, burned himself and their two sons to death. There are two interpretations of this violent criminal act: on the one hand, the official British one, which call it “an act of passion, a tragic event” and on the other hand the private one, supported by the ethnic community, that it was the woman's *karma*, her fate for leaving her husband (Cf. Syal, 2000: 218), both interpretations opposed by the group.



Gendered family violence

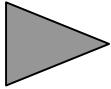
Acid burns (in *Brick Lane*), or wife beating (in *Feasting Fasting*, *The God of Small Things*, or *Shame*) are only a few other types of gendered family violence described in novels by South-Asian authors, and the only answer women are expected to give is to endure the test god has put in front of them (Cf. Ali, 2003: 267). The violent institutional treatment of South-Asian women and the cultural, religious and educational context in which they are raised are masterfully rendered in the novels. One such instance is the secondary story of a female character who appears only once in the parallel plot of the two sisters' lives: Hasina, who ran away at sixteen with her lover and Nazneen who was married by her family to the England-emigrated Chanu. Monju's tragic death told through Hasina's limited linguistic resources in a letter to her sister is for that very reason even more dramatic; her description on the hospital bed made with realistic means is meant to shatter and challenge the reader, and does so successfully:

I go to hospital and look around for friend Monju. (...) When I walk close is bad odour emitting from thing lie on mattress. I must put hans over nose and mouth and stomach made threat on me. (...) Left eye is narrow and stuff come out. Cheek and mouth is melt and ear have gone like dog chew off. (...) She say God give them the pain I suffering now. Mouth cavity shrinking from which she cannot shout cry or talk loud. (...) It is her husband who have done this with his brother and sister. Brother and sister hold tight and husband pour acid over head face and body. All over is infection on body and smell make it difficult for people to go near (Ali, 2003: 223)

Wife battering is not class or caste restricted, as we learn from *The God of Small Things*, Pappachi, a cultivated and admired man, has a completely different face in the family, where he points his frustrations and power signs against the female members, his wife and daughter. Although he simultaneously creates a public image of a "sophisticated, generous, moral man", in the private sphere, "alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated, and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father" (Roy, 1997: 180). Ammu's memory of her childhood experiences with the beatings suffered and the nights spent in the bushes with her mother, awaiting for her father's fury to pass are dramatic (Cf. Roy, 1997: 181). However, Mammachi will suffer at the death of her husband because in a perverse way, "she was used to being beaten from time to time" (Roy, 1997: 50). Ammu is not made of the same material, in the generational gap between the two we can read her determination to change the

world; when she suffers the same treatment from her husband, including beatings and humiliations, such as trading her for his job, and most importantly, when the violent episodes started including their twin children, Ammu gets a divorce and goes back to her family (Cf. Roy, 1997: 42). Changing the world Ammu does not manage, her tragic and short life is masterfully narrated by Roy.

Even when beatings do not happen, a warning should be uttered, as in *Shame*, as “a good man can go bad, like meat, if you do not keep him coil” (Rushdie 1083: 76). Rani’s words are in fact premonitory, as both her and her friend Bilquis’ husbands will eventually “turn bad” in many different ways.



State violence

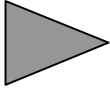
Midnight’s Children deals with state violence during the period of the Emergency, and with some of Indira Gandhi’s controversial policies, such as the Family Planning Scheme and the Resettlement Scheme, implemented in Delhi. In agreement with the rest of the novel, in which all public events and national history mirror private stories, the beginning of The Emergency period is made to coincide with the birth of Saleem’s son (in the same way as his own birth had coincided with the birth of modern India): “at the precise instant of India’s arrival at Emergency, he emerged” (Rushdie 1984: 405). The description of the birth parallels the one of Saleem’s, which is interspersed with fragments from the patriotic discourse of Jawaharlal Nehru; this time, the fast succession of dramatic events leading to what has been called by some critics Indira Gandhi’s dictatorship, is mixed with the actual delivery scene, the outcome of which was a perfectly healthy boy, except for his elephant ears (again mirroring his father’s big nose), suggesting supernatural powers. The long complex sentences which include the juxtaposed events suggest the strong connection between them:

Parvati gave a final pitiable little yelp and out he popped, while all over India policemen were arresting people, all opposition leaders except members of the pro-Moscow Communists, and also schoolteachers lawyers poets newspapermen trade-unionists, in fact anyone who had ever made the mistake of sneezing during Madam’s speeches, and when the three contortionists had washed the baby and wrapped it in an old sari and brought it out for its father to see, at exactly the same moment, the word Emergency was being heard for the first time, and suspension-of-civil rights, and censorship-of-the-press, and armoured-units-on-special-alert, and arrest-of-subversive-elements; something was ending, something was being born, and at the precise instant of the birth of the new India and the beginning of a continuous midnight which would not end for two long years, my son, the child of he renewed ticktock, came out into the world (Rushdie 1984: 404)

The Emergency period is described in bleak terms by an enumeration of the ill-doings and violence: “Oh. The utter barbarity of India during the consulship of those terrible twins! The beatings, the bullyings, the jailings, the flailings, the burnings, the bannings, the sellings, the shamelessness, the shamelessness, the shame” (Rushdie 2000: 248). Also, it includes victims of violent death, such as Parvati’s, which happened during the City beautification programme, and which is again presented by Rushdie as a direct consequence of Saleem’s deeds (Cf. Rushdie 1984: 415). In opposition, its end is mentioned in the same novel in an ironical way: “Emergency rule was ended. No longer necessary: the electorate had endorsed tyranny and corruption” (Rushdie 2000: 245).

Birth control was one of the policies of the Emergency period (but is referred to in the novel also as an obstetrician’s obsession, strangely conceived against his own profession as “Public Priority Number One”. Rushdie 1984: 114), and it was directed against men, motivated to have vasectomies by pitiful state gifts, such as radio transistors. Since then, claims Rushdie, the transistor has come to symbolize impotence: “ever since the notorious free-transistor sterilization bribe, the squawking machine has represented what men could do before scissors sniped and knots were tied” (Rushdie 1984: 165). It is performed on the children of midnight, i.e. the children born with India’s independence, and it leads through its finality to “the draining-out of hope”, labelled by Rushdie as “sperectomy” (Rushdie 1984: 421). Forced sterilization and the civic beautification programmes go hand in hand in the novel (Cf. Rushdie 1984: 413-416), they are described (yet again!) as a public attack on the personal destiny of the main character. These state policies seem to have been designed only to violate Saleem’s life, and in this way he is deemed responsible for the tragedy of his nation; Major Shiva, his brother into birth, is the one who, by seeing to the direct and extensive implementation of the policies, becomes “the warlord of tyranny” (Rushdie 1984: 415). The magicians’ slum, whose destruction is shouted from official loudspeakers (“Civic beautification programme...authorized operation of Sanjay Youth Central Committee...prepare instantly for evacuation to new site...this slum is a public eyesore, can no longer be tolerated...all persons will follow orders without dissent”. Rushdie 1984: 413-414), is symbolically pulled down and, together with their forced sterilization, can be interpreted as violent state intervention into the lives of its citizens. On the same line, of strange connections and absurd explanations, the influence of hair-styles on the course of history is found to be the source of the double-sided nature of Emergency:

...if the Mother of the Nation had a coiffure of uniform pigment, the Emergency she spawned might easily have lacked a darker side. But she had white hair on one side and black on the other; the Emergency, too, had a white part – public, visible, documented, a matter for historians – and a black part which, being secret, macabre untold, must be a matter for us (Rushdie 1984: 406).

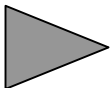


The trans-gendered body and violence

A special case of “violated body” in India is that of *hijras*, a hybrid, with the boundaries between the two sexes and genders blurred and fuzzy to the extreme. The hybrid sex/gender character of the *hijras* is compared by Patel to the mayonnaise (idea taken from Maria Lugones in “Purity, Impurity and Separation”):

For Lugones hybridity is precisely that which is situated in and implicated with the heart of her homelike mayonnaise, it is <<neither/nor, but kind of both, not quite either, something in the middle of either/or>>. Hybridity brings with it ambiguity, and with that possibility threatens the orderliness of schematized reality. (Schwartz and Ray, 2000: 413)

The *hijras* are usually represented as men who are not quite “normal”, they are equated in Indian media or scholarship with “zenane” (gay men), eunuchs, hermaphrodites, transsexuals and people who are trans-gendered, and they sometimes speak of themselves as intersexed “people” or gendered inverts (effeminate men) who may have been castrated or “emasculated”. Many acquiesce to trans-naming such as eunuchs or hermaphrodites, but distance themselves from “zenane”, calling them inauthentic or incomplete *hijras* (according to Geeta Patel , 2000: 417). *Hijras* wear women’s clothing and jewellery, and undergo a castration ceremony in which their penis and/or testicles are sliced off by a midwife without benefit of painkillers in a ritual that is said to include moments that echo the ones performed for women during marriage and childbirth. The *hijras* then dance and sing at occasions such as births and weddings predominantly Urdu/Hindi songs drawn from genres like mystical (*sufi*) or films (often with love lyrics) or “curse” songs. They are supposed to bring luck to a household, therefore they can demand and are given as much cash as the family can afford.



Conclusion

As seen from the above analysis, the numerous instances of violence in the English-language novels by authors of South-Asian origin exemplify specific state policies, such as the Emergency period or the civic beautification and male sterilization programmes, political murders and acts of state violence, all instruments of state disciplining and control over individuals. In the analysis, a special emphasis was laid on the episodes of continuous institutional gender aggression, described in the novels with all their specific details and their impact on the lives of characters.

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