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In the Shadow of Terror: Terrorism and the contemporary Indian novel in English*

Meenakshi Bharat**

First came the scream of the dying
in a bad dream, then the radio report,
and a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty-five
houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied
behind their backs inside a church.
As the days crumbled, and the victors
and their victims grew in number,
I hardened inside my thickening hide
until I lost my tenuous humanity.

I ceased thinking
of abandoned children inside blazing huts
still waiting for their parents.
If they remembered their grandmothers tales
of many winter hearths at the hour
of sleeping death, I don't want to know,
if they ever learnt the magic of letters.
And the women heavy with seed,
their soft bodies mown down
like grain stalk during their lyric harvests;

Robin S. Ngangom[1]

* Revised version of the lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 23 July 2013.

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In being thus forced to becoming a reluctant witness to the terror being unleashed in the world, Robin Ngangom, Meitei poet from the North Eastern Indian state of Manipur, seems to have touched the defining chord of our times. Having himself given word to this terror in his poetry, his words ring truer with the forced recognition that 'terror' seems indeed to have become a decided cultural marker not only in the world, but quite piquantly, on the Indian subcontinent. Our today seems to have become characterized by the thorny identification between the output of our creative imagination and the sweep of an almost rabid violent ideological politics which reveals itself in the widespread acts of terrorism and the terrifyingly 'regular' outbreak of terror-generating riots. The erstwhile correlation between art and life, acknowledged spontaneously and quite unproblematically in 'good' times, with the happy acceptance of rubrics like the 'Renaissance', 'the Golden Age', is very difficult and knotty today. In the past, the assertion that the greatest periods of creativity have been periods of prosperity and peace, veritable, golden periods had been much bandied. But in today's confusing, anarchic turmoil, is there any space for creativity?

With this latter day facility lost, riding the uneasy winds of globalization, terror seems to have come to establish a stranglehold on the minds of intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike; of both thinkers and creative minds. In more bizarre ways than any other aspect of today's world, the theme seems to have emerged as a discomforting leveller. Moreover, as a corollary to the rise of the importance of the contemporary, the roots and growth of creativity necessarily come to be located in these violent underpinnings. Little wonder that literature in the subcontinent, a popular and visible cultural witness to this strain, has taken it up with remarkable frequency. It is this recurrent strain in contemporary literature from India that interests me for I believe that in understanding this lies a unique key to a grasp of the cultural make-up of the times and its reverberations on the sense of self and belonging to a particular nation.

Taking Foucault's observation that 'the forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflicts' (1977: 154) as the starting point, the compulsive

treatment of violent face-offs in the shape of terror and riots becomes extremely significant—for what are these, if not random, chaotic events. Seen in this light, the novels become an embodiment of the impetus and the effort to chart the new contentious trajectory that the 'history' of the nation seems to be taking. Indeed, by doing this they call into question the commitment of the individual to the nation—the sense of 'self' itself, under threat of the disquiet resulting from these repeated acts of terror and rioting that keep rearing their heads with frightening regularity to stall the onward march of the nation as Nehru, independent India's first Prime Minister had envisaged it.

So, with the evidence that ever since the country gained independence as an unhappy accompaniment to the requiem of the holocaustic Partition which cleft the nation into two communal parts—one Muslim and the other Hindu—riots and acts of terror have become an inescapable part of Indian existence. This partition of the subcontinent into two separate nations set up an abiding enmity between the two people, leaving the two countries squabbling for border tracts of land, questioning the lines drawn by the retreating colonizing master who had little or no understanding of the cultural commixture of the two religious communities. Mirza Waheed notes as much in *The Collaborator* (2010)[2], 'there is [now] always an Indian and a Pakistani version of everything'. (Ibid., 33). The sibling rivalry of yore has hardened to an irreversible distrust of the other and it is this unhappy legacy that reveals itself in repeated conflagration in riots within the country, and incursions into each other's space in terrorist fashion and it is this aspect of our contemporary predicament that novelists take up again and again. While Basharat Peer may starkly document the dramatic changes being wrought thus, 'By the summer of 1990, thousands of young Kashmiri men crossed the Line of Control…and they returned as militants', (2010: 24) he also talks of the cultural reverberations in the excitement that their 'stories' generated. Deploying literary and aesthetic terminology, he gives his creative alibis for writing his much-commended personal and 'collective' memoir, *Curfewed Nights* (2010)[3]: 'they were *heroes*—people wanted to talk to them, touch them, *hear their stories*, and invite them for a feast'. (Ibid., My italics.) It would seem as if the compelling reality that he is talking about begs fictionalization; indeed demands aesthetic commemoration in its approximation to the excitement of the fictional world.

These negative disruptions in the progress of the nation's development, marked by the riots and terror incidents, are seen to not only rupture the individual 'national's' sense of self as a national entity, but in being picked up by the novel, they become 'singular' events that mark the narrative of the nation's history. As such then, this isolation in fiction and the radical, interpretive, imaginative, meaningful treatment of 'current' events—in a manner quite distinct from the way the media handles them—enables alternative ways of thinking about the past, and of identifying the national self. The recognition of the singularity, however dubious it may be, of these events as historical ruptures, the 'disruptive events' that Foucault said could make for veritable meaningful political intervention (Young 2004: 120), draw attention to issues of decisive importance to today's 'Indian'. Hence it is that the extensive cover of the theme in literature draws fresh attention to the niggling notions of nationhood, citizenship and allegiance to beliefs. This radical disjunction between the disruptive event and the possibility of meaning that resides at the interstices of this cultural engagement becomes a characterizing mark of the contemporary.

So, through art, we come to the inherent paradox of our times: these mean times are yet 'historical' in a piquant sense. Writing terror and riots and giving them creative shape, despite the overwhelming abundance of media coverage and debate on the subject, has become an integral part of historiography with the artist/the writer/the narrator taking on the mantle of the proxy historian in this context, an 'event' recorder as it were. In a country that has seen the maximum number of deaths due to terrorist attacks over the years and where political activity and the nationalist agenda have to necessarily take this into account, it is little wonder that the theme catches the imagination of the novelist. This is the fact that Bhavani Iyer recognizes and states simply, 'Evocation of any country's collective consciousness is usually mirrored in its popular art forms.'[4] In the present scenario then, it becomes quite clear that if, in conceptualizing the present, these acts of terror are either suppressed or not recognized or even wilfully excluded, then the whole process of historiography would become a lie. In giving them creative cover in literature, the latter become the means for verbalizing 'the truth' inherent in the present and in the process. It is this 'truth' that needs to be nailed by following this process with the

explicit aim of working out this cultural trajectory. How does terror hit out at the very roots of the forward moving ideology and how, in turn, does contemporary literature negotiate with this downturn? How do these parley with the traditional progressive Nehruvian model for the nation; with the state-embraced notion of secularism? One way of initiating an inquiry is by enunciating basic posers: how does literature narrate the nation in these conflict-ridden, terror-struck times? In the answer, I discern the possibilities of the location of a new cultural model for the nation.

Of course, these exercising issues have much in common with those of the world which has revealed itself to be morbidly and compulsively fascinated with this disturbing topic. The West sees these acts of terror—9/11 having become a key 'event'—as bringing about, as Ian McEwan said in an interview a few months after the terror attacks, 'great changes' in the world from which it has to 'learn' (Donadio 2005).[5] The event that seemed, in its very reality, more fantastic and more creative than fiction itself, seemed to scotch the creative attempt by virtue of having simply outdone it. Small wonder, the initial shocked reaction was a mental repudiation of the creativity of fiction. While Martin Amis felt that post September 11, 2001 'all the writers on earth were reluctantly considering a change of occupation' (Amis 2002), McEwan himself had bemoaned its inefficacy saying that he now found it 'wearisome to confront invented characters'. His early despondent gut reaction to the horror of 9/11 found him doubting the fictional locating merit only in fact. Reeling under the shock of the monstrous terrorist attack, he says, 'I wanted to be told about the world. I wanted to be informed.' Yet, it was not long before he found himself on the storywriter's desk again with the subject of terror, to pen the novel, *Saturday* (2005).[6] As did many others![7] The fact that McEwan goes on to himself illuminate a path for all who attempt to write on the subject, the choice and the act of writing a novel on the subject comes as a renewal of faith in creativity and its possibilities. In the light of this, the fiction writer's task comes to be invested with the unmistakable implication of its interpretive richness and the intimation that its insights are rare: evidently, what fiction can do is something beyond the ability of mere fact: it can take stock of disruptions, of change in a better manner, and its lessons are unique.

But whereas, McEwan's novelistic abilities had been temporarily frozen by the enormity of a terror attack, in India, living with the menace of guns, and the constant fear of one's own people turning against one, as do familiar Calcutta streets in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988),[8] there is the other unique and imminent danger of this terror turning 'banal'; of believing that there is nothing in it to excite the creative imagination. But it is not long before one realizes that even here, in India, the evidence of aesthetic witness intervenes to remind us that this element of the contemporary merits special attention, that it is a task that must inevitably be essayed. Moreover, the multifariousness of the narratives emerging in the country, quite often with conflicting interpretations, makes for a rich, fruitful and critical matrix on which the art can thrive.

What then are the dabblers in the art of writing fiction trying to accomplish through their efforts? What do they create or recreate, write or re-write, picture or re-picture? With the creative writer imaginatively responding to the dangers that terrorism spells for the ordinary person and for humanity at large, it emerges that he is attempting to go beyond the very basic and limited definition of terrorism as any organized violence, by an individual, group or state, legitimate or illegitimate, against a civilian population, either intentional or unintentional. As he probes deep into the various possible origins of the actions, it becomes clear that the all too apparent exceptional cover that the theme has received in fiction, poetry, journalism, film(short/long/mainstream/independent/documentary) goes beyond mere acknowledgement of a contemporary phenomenon. There is an underlying dynamic that runs through these cultural indicators and that defines the course they are to take. It becomes imperative for the cultural theorist to ascertain these pointers and to recognize the responsibilities that following this course entails. So, when Neruda emphatically urges people to

> Come and see the blood in the streets.
> Come and see
> the blood in the streets
> Come and see the blood
> in the streets!
>
> 'Explicoalgunascosas'
> (I explain a few things, 1937, trans. 1970) Pablo Neruda

step out to witness the violence, the call becomes a bidding not just to witness, but to participate and to share in a responsibility. It would seem that Pablo Neruda, in early enunciating this exhortation to witness the terror overtaking the world, and by himself bearing 'witness' to it in his poetry, emphasizes its vital importance today. This double demand becomes the iteration of one of the most problematic paradoxes of the age: in these irresponsible times, creativity verbalizes the acknowledgment of the fact that we are all liable; that we are all answerable.

In this fraught scenario, it is evident that the subcontinent as a whole has seen the publication of a significant number of novels on the subject. An added incentive to such writing in the Indian subcontinent has been the proliferation of fictional responses to terrorism in the West, especially in reaction to 9/11, and the considerable success with which they have been received. Moreover, it is to be noted that all the subcontinental nations, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, all countries that have had more than their share of insurgency in the years following independence from British rule, have witnessed the release of a slew of novels on the subject. Amongst these, there is a preponderance of publications in English, the language that our erstwhile colonising masters left for us as a legacy. From Pakistan, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid (2007); *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) by Mohammad Hanif; *A Wasted Vigil* (2008) by Nadeem Aslam; and H.M. Naqvi's *The Homeboy* (2009), all approach and develop the subject variously. Hamid and Naqvi explore the psychological impact of a terror attack on cosmopolitan Pakistani men who had, till then, been absolutely integrated, culturally and emotionally, in America but who, with 9/11 and the subsequent backlash on Muslims, are forced to reconsider not only their relationship with America, but also themselves as Muslims, as Pakistanis. These broken, battered individuals distinctly veer towards a reactionary extremism. Hanif probes the 'terrorist' plot to assassinate President Zia ul Haq and Aslam's novel touted to be 'the only Pakistani English novel to explore the chilling world-view of a religious extremist, and the manner in which "terror cells" proliferate' (Shamsie, 2009: 23) locates his action in Afghanistan, one of the foremost terrorist training hubs. Writers of Sri Lankan origin too have written about the Tamil

rebellion and subversive activity that ravaged the country in the recent past: Sri Lankan-born novelist, Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) deals with the racial attacks and political killings and the resultant state of continual emergency on the island nation from 1983 onwards. It focuses on the terrorism of the separatist guerrilla groups fighting for a homeland in north Sri Lanka, the uprising against the government by insurgents in the south, and the counter terrorist efforts of the Special Forces against both. The earlier generational saga, *When Memory Dies* (1997) by A. Sivanandan too attempts to contextualise the Tamil insurgency against the long history of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. It expressly highlights the fracture left by the erstwhile colonial masters and which spills over to mar and rend the present.

Multilingual, multi-ethnic India too has seen a great deal of writing on the subject. While it is a fact that literature written in other Indian languages has also addressed terrorism, the most notable examples being, Meera Kant from Jammu and Kashmir, who writes in Hindi and has published short fiction and plays on the theme, and Gulzar, from Punjab, who has written film scripts, short fiction and poetry in Urdu, yet the more considerable turnout has been from English-writing India. Most of these books have seen publication in the last thirteen years or so, coinciding with the turn of the century, the latest, *My Moon has Blood Clots* by Rahul Pandita, coming out as recently as 2013.

Obviously then, the context necessitates deep probes into the ethical limits and possibilities of the artistic endeavour: can the novelist presume to enunciate an opinion? Or more, to issue directives? Has he the moral right to tilt the balance one way or the other? It is more than abundantly clear that in the face of the volatility of theme, he will find it hard to remain neutral. In fact, there is a presupposition of an ethical stance in his very act of opting to talk about this touchy issue. Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* openly gestures to the subversion of principles when he says, 'I am sure it's a human rights catastrophe waiting to be noticed.' (2011: 16). This leads us to the resurrection of the old murky and much bandied debate whether it is at all ethical to take any stands in art. But never before has it been as pertinent as now, especially with reference to this theme, and it is necessary to acknowledge and respect its relevance: the crucial question of artistic

responsibility and the role of the artist in relation to the pressure of significant contemporary events has become pivotal and unavoidable. And yet, all the while, it will also be essential to keep track of whether the author is fulfilling (or at least, aspiring to fulfil) the counter aesthetic requirement of transcending the limitations of his own personal prejudices in his writing. The palpable tension between these contra premises in turn, necessitates a deeper investigation of the ideologies, beliefs, and social and political structures of the society to which these 'authors' belong. The turbulent contemporary scenario throws this, to use Noam Chomsky's words, 'distorted morality'[9] and all the allied issues into question. Again, Robin Ngangom, in corroboration, amply highlights this *distortion* in the emotionally debilitating realization of a killing difference between a wholesome, happy past and a distressing, violent present:

> Childhood took place
> free from manly fears
> when I had only my mother's love
> to protect me from knives,
> from fire, and death by water.
> I wore it like an amulet.
> Childhood took place
> among fairies and were tigers
> when hills were yours to tumble
> before they became soldiers. Barracks
> and dreaded chambers of torture.
> Childhood took place
> before your friend worshipped a gun
> to become a widowmaker.[10]
>
> Robin Ngangom, (2000)

In this ongoing 'reign of terror', Ngangom plainly identifies the role of the creative artist as that of a witness, an annalist and as a voice of the communal conscience.

So, are we witnessing the making of history? Of significant history even? With the memorialization of events like the riots following the theft of the Prophet Muhammed's holy hair from Hazratbal in 1963–1964 that become the focal events of Amitav Ghosh's 1988 Sahitya Akademi Award Winner, *The Shadow Lines*; the Mumbai blasts of

2003 finding mention in Kiran Nagarkar's *God's Little Soldier* (2006), and the Taj imbroglio of 2008 prefigured in Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games (*2007), we realize that over and over again the artist seems compelled by the urgent need to artistically commemorate these events which have little of the 'grandeur' associated with the great conflicts of past times. These are events that are politically, socially and morally diminishing in impact; events that entail tremendous loss.

With the notion of terrorism being a diffuse and amorphous one, the juxtaposition of the term with specific instances of terror raises the question of whether these merit reckoning as 'history' at all. In the context of times when popular responses, especially those of the youth, threaten to reduce the history of the nation to mere disenchanting texts in the school curriculum, or to distil millennia into a finger-count of major events like the coming of the British or the drawing of a cleaving line across the subcontinent, where do these recurring assaults on the fragile peaceful entity of the nation stand? It is evident that today, a considerable number of writers of fiction have reawakened to the pertinence of the fine-print details of our very recent past, indeed almost of our today, to go beyond the premise of only signal events constituting significant history, to attempt a location of meaning in the so-called 'little' events which may not find their way individually into the annals of history but which collectively, have had the most far-reaching impact on the psyche of the nation. Since I am stepping into the ongoing dialogue from a very niche portal, the entry way provided by the literary word, by the fictional narrative, the inevitable first allied doubt, vis á vis these novels that arises is whether they are merely symptomatic of a desperate attempt to insert the sordid contemporary into the larger enveloping narrative of history. Or do these creative forays become indicative of something else? That there is something happening in the mean 'now' that is important enough to find space in history? In this scenario, the individual terrorist incursion would certainly fall under the head of 'little' history in the sense that we have now defined the term. Hence, the mentions of the demonstrations on the streets of Srinagar in *The Collaborator* as the 'roadfuls of azadi-crying people on the street' (Waheed 2011: 36), the reference to the 1989 kidnapping of Rubaiya Sayeed by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (Ibid., 2011: 81) and to the appointment of the ' new Governor, this tyrant'

Jagmohan (Ibid., 2011: 163). The extensive time span, the definitive geographical and demographic cover, are some of the many specifics that make a historical reckoning inevitable.

In this evident appeal of the living contemporary in the fiction focusing on terrorism, Foucault's description of his own work as the history or the diagnosis of the present, as the analysis of 'what today is' becomes particularly relevant and illuminating. On a number of occasions, he has noted that our own times and lives are not the beginning or end of some 'historical' process, but a period like, but at the same time unlike, any other. If the question should simply be, 'how is today different from yesterday?',[11] then concerted, organized terrorism submits itself as one differentiating feature of our 'today', with the marked moment becoming Foucault's *event* and Deleuze's *rupture*, the little event central to the writing of the 'little' history that we've been talking about. In the firm belief that these 'little' histories are as important in defining a nation as the mega events of history,[12] inevitable follow-up requirements of identifying the histories that these texts seem to be writing and to which these texts bear witness arise. Thus, an early step to understanding the idea of terrorism enshrined within these fictional narratives would be to contextualize it against the larger history of the nation.

At this point, as further substantiation, it is also important that the Stephen Slemon model of history be recalled. Amongst the many assumptions, presumptions and suppositions about the role and definition of history, this approach emphasizes that history is always recalled to a purpose. Slemon says quite pointedly that 'postcolonial allegories are concerned with neither redeeming nor annihilating, but with displacing it as a concept and opening up the past to imaginative revision' (1988: 165). Prior to the post terrorist novel, this imaginative revisioning of the past in novels by Indians had significantly meant alighting upon and focusing on watershed historical markers like the Partition of India, the one key historical event of the subcontinent, or the 1857 revolt against the British. But, when novelists concertedly pick up almost contemporaneous events that may not have the same degree of visibility, or even the same kind of importance as mega markers in the history of the nation, then the revisioning becomes a

signal of the fact that these terrorist underpinnings have a significant directional role to play in the fashioning of the national character and its identity. In the past couple of decades, the recent acts of terror and terrorist onslaughts in Kashmir, in the northeast, in the heartland, in the capital, have become ready and popular fodder for the Indian novelist writing in English and all point to an important truth of our today. The implication is that a revisioning of history can only be accomplished by a reconsideration of the present; by a re-look at what is happening around us. This is a necessary pre-junct to alert national awareness. It is through the iteration of these local events in these novels that the contemporary writer is trying to—and managing to—articulate a deeper history. Each event, localized though it is, ultimately reaches out to access the deeper recesses of the archives of the nation to end up in building up a new postcolonial, contemporary edifice for the nation that is India. If literature, as Linda Orr avows, 'remains implicated in history',[13] (1986: 1) then history, in its everyday avatar, for its part too, finds its nesting place in literature. It is in this symbiotic relationship between the little disruptive records of time and the literary creations of contemporary writers of fiction from the Indian subcontinent that alternative histories are located and penned, and conventional historiography questioned.

What is Terrorism?

I am not going to engage in an extended discussion of the concept of terrorism because defining it has been one of the most confounding tasks for intellectuals and experts. Nonetheless, a brief word is necessary. The debate is ongoing and vexatious because there is very little agreement about its definition, scope or modes of containment. The lack of consensus in contemporary discourses on terrorism has ended up making this one of the most fraught areas of study. It is generally understood that terrorism has an association with the element of criminality which is perpetrated in specific circumstances by a person or persons, generally belonging to a certain group. Politicians, tacticians, security personnel and lawyers constantly wrangle about what it is, how one should deal with it, and have been unable to come up with definitive, or convincing reasons for their answers and solutions. The constant debate has even given rise to a specialist field of studies called

Critical Terrorism Studies. This has done little to lift the shroud of ambiguity that continues to envelop the subject. There is still a major disagreement about not only the purview of the term but also the ethical right of one to label another a terrorist. With more than a hundred different definitions doing the rounds, the only common distillation that one arrives at is that it is a multifaceted notion that in its complexity and confounding opacity, announces its enormity and the need for understanding and decoding.

It is this need that the post terrorist novel attempts to fulfil by trying to deal with the fecund spaces submerged in these ambiguities. It is for this very reason, moreover, that the post terrorist novel defies typecasting. The variety of perspectives, the range of aesthetic styles and techniques deployed make it an interesting sub-genre. When this contentious subject comes to be dealt with in literature, a number of allied and inevitable questions come up. If terrorism is seen in the popular contemporary sense of a religion-or ideology-backed attack on the state or the civilian population, the question of ethical right and responsibility still remains. How would the treatment of this controversial theme in literature be seen? If terrorism studies are mired in prejudice, would not fiction about terrorists too be partisan and evaluative in the very choice of a directed narrative and a single perspective? How can the act of presenting this 'evil' ever be justified? Would it not amount to sheer unethical glorification? Would not the ideological allegiances of terrorism studies find sustenance and backing in fiction?

The novel also seems to be the most natural carrier of the various moves of the newly emerging field of Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) that we have just remarked. This area of enquiry incorporates the latest approach which focuses on the personality of the terrorist rather than on the terrorist act or terrorism. It also incorporates the 'pathways' research technique which banks on a psychopathological approach to terrorism. While CTS today purports to recognize the ideological reasons for both terrorism and counter-terrorism and aims to give a 'more precise and more balanced understanding of terrorism that takes into account the view of those who are currently marginalized', (Sussex research: 22) fictional representation would question the honesty and validity of all these approaches and force a rethinking of the

schema through which we understand violence, whether in war or in terrorism**.**

History of Terrorism in India

Having noted the development of a full-fledged area of terrorist studies, it will become clear that it closely follows the conventional trajectory of history. Contextualized thus, the act of terror is best understood in the perspective of power relations. The hegemonic political inclination will define the terrorist in a particular situation at a particular time. Take, for example, the official pronouncement of the illegitimacy and the criminalization of any act of resistance by Indian freedom fighters by the British rulers or the Rajas an act of terrorism. With the declaration of freedom, the erstwhile 'terrorists' now come to power to completely reverse the appellation to fit in with changed political circumstances.

But if one digs deeper, the history of the notion of terrorism possibly starts even earlier in India which has perhaps had a longer and more chequered history of terrorism than any other part of the globe. Over the centuries, invaders have been attracted to prosperous 'India', the *sone ki chidiya,* a veritable Golden Bird. Some marauded, pillaged and left; others came and stayed, bleeding the land dry of its wealth. These historical encounters, bringing two entities in confrontation have excited the labelling of 'terrorist' for one or the other, giving validity to the vexing cliché of one man's freedom fighter being another man's terrorist. But terrorism as we understand it today is absolutely different from earlier notions and this is the avatar in which we are interested, especially in its appearance in fiction written in English.

Terrorism and particular terrorist attacks coming at this critical juncture become worthy of study as nodes of intersections between individual and collective consciousness. This scenario in which individuality is seen to be socially and historically constructed[14] provokes a series of spin-off questions: are these attempts at outlining an alternative history genuinely, a fresh intervention or are they just other ways of looking at the old, the larger history of the nation, and

as such, are they nothing but a perpetuation of older historical paradigms? Or, are they merely being picked up because the larger history has been bled dry and is, therefore, exhausted of novelty? Whatever it is, there is evidently something intrinsic that make these literary responses to recent, lesser known historical events vital to the constitution of the concept of nationality. How does the 'insurgent nationalism' (if such a discrepant term may be used) of the terrorist, figure in the marking of the ordinary moment in the contemporary literary text from the Indian subcontinent? How do these 'events', keeping with the Foucauldian line of thought, link with the continuum and how do they disrupt? Clearly then, the novels dealing with this theme fall in with Foucault's claim that he was more interested in writing a history of problems than a history of solutions. In this breakaway perspective, the traditional and dated approach to historiography, wherein the history of periods and institutions were chalked out, is just not exciting enough. Foucault's description of the history of thought as 'the analysis of the way an unproblematic field of experience or set of practices which were accepted without question... becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in the previously silent behaviour, habits, practices and, institutions' (2001)[15], becomes particularly relevant in the context of terrorism. The terrorist act, in being one major problematic intervention in the even stream of life, makes it one of the most enigmatic features of contemporary life.

Contemporary Terrorism in India

If terrorism is an ambiguous term, then outlining a chronology of terror activities in a nation as vast as India, and with a history as long, is by no means an easy task. The threat perception in India is high because of the many fronts on which this 'illegitimate' battle is fought. The diversity of the country which embraces many cultures, ethnicities and classes, implies of necessity, that tension nodes will be aplenty. The cover of the contemporary terrorist net in the country is indeed very wide because it involves threats from both within the country and without, originating from neighbouring countries. Ultimately, both kinds of disturbances hark back to the history of religious and communal tension in India which predates even the Partition, the slicing event

with its origins in the inherent colonialist management philosophy of dividing and ruling, which has become the reckoning historical matrix from which contemporary terrorism in India more often than not seems to arise. The Partition of India in August 1947 which accompanied the breaking free of British colonialist control saw the breakout of the worst riots that the world has possibly ever seen, with estimated deaths being in the region of 500,000. The Radcliffe Line divided the country into two independent nations on broadly religious lines. By thus artificially and forcibly carving out a 'Muslim' land from a predominantly Hindu land, it was but natural that a great deal of tension would be triggered. The fallout continues to this day. The division was not, indeed could never be, a clean one simply because the communities were not limited to neatly earmarked cordoned spaces but were, in fact, spread through the length and breadth of the nation.

The unhappiness with the post-Partition situation has fanned a great deal of secessionist fervour. For the most part, the emergent separatist movements have been Islamic[16] in colour, constantly feeding on the tension between the minority Muslims and the majority Hindus. For this reason, Kashmir, the border state between India and Pakistan has become a critical terrorist zone. Subsequently, the tension has filtered into the rest of the country with repeated attacks targeting various places, the most devastating of them being those targeting Mumbai, the financial capital of the country and New Delhi, the capital city. Other metropolises like Hyderabad and Bangalore, the Muslim hinterland, even Varanasi a premier Hindu pilgrim centre have been the butt of terror activity.[17] Ultimately, Islamic terrorism involving Indians, either as perpetrators or as victims has spread to the international arena.

For beginning the approach to a very complex situation, and for the lack of a better one, the broadly defined state demarcations of the various kinds and sites of terrorist activity in India may serve:

1. Islamic terrorism located mainly in the border state of Jammu and Kashmir.

2. Islamic terrorism in other parts of the country especially the attacks in Mumbai and Delhi.

3. Separatist activity in the Punjab in the 1980s and the early 1990s by the Sikh community who demanded their own independent state of Khalistan.

4. The current Maoist and Naxal uprising in the heart of the country spurred by the lack of equal economic opportunities and the fleecing of the locals by self-seeking opportunists.

5. The on-going secessionist insurgency in the North Eastern states.

As is obvious by even this preliminary point survey, terrorism seems to have a hold on nearly the whole country. This is a frightening inversion of the popular nationalist unifying Indian slogan, 'Kashmir se Kanyakumari tak, ham sab ek hain' (From Kashmir to Kanyakumari, we are one). The extent of the land from the named northernmost and southernmost tips shows the completeness of the cover of the umbrella of pervasive militancy. More than two-thirds of the country's districts are afflicted to a greater or lesser extent by different terrorist movements.[18] The third National Security Advisor, M.K. Narayanan has been known to have acknowledged at one point that there were almost eight hundred terrorist cells functioning within the country.

The overall experience of terror for the Indian then needs to take into account the antecedents of terror in the obvious fact that the Indian subcontinent has now had a long history of association with it. Terror has, as it were, ignominiously made its home here. This recognition also holds the key to the paradoxical and disheartening simultaneity of a lurking fear of its imminence on the one hand, and a resignation and acceptance on the other. With tremendous consequences in all fields—political, economic, social, and psychological—terrorist eruptions thus hack at the conventional developmental pattern of continuous history. The fractures in the multiethnic, multicultural, multiclass society of India, caught in power and ideological struggles, engender the sense of rupture which assaults both the insurgents and the counter-insurgent cadres alike to undercut the established ideas of nation and nationality.

Attraction of Terrorism as Theme

As is clear by now, terror has become a major and inescapable reality of our times. Following the time-tested Aristotelian critical maxim that literature holds up a mirror to the times, contemporary writing zeroes in on the theme of terrorism with concerted repetition. It would be interesting to ascertain whether this literature is also able to affect some kind of a catharsis of the pain, the trauma that accompanies terror. This line of enquiry leads to a very challenging conundrum: if terror is a continuing problem and terror attacks, a recurrent phenomenon, would a complete exorcism, a full catharsis ever be possible? Also, if terror entails dramatization of trauma, why do we pick it up over and over again and thus give it continued life? Finally, if we label the experience as trauma then the reactions that come through literature hardly seem to fit into the theoretical constructs of the field in the Freudian and Caruthian sense with their basic formulations of delayed, postponed treatment. It took almost half a century to start confronting the trauma of the holocaust of World War I or even to confront the Partition openly.[19] Today, we seem to be living through one traumatic event after another and yet, we are able to treat them with almost simultaneous responsiveness. Does this imply that the events figure low on the trauma metre; that they are not 'traumatic' enough to make us stay away from them? Or is it that we are becoming so used to it that we are becoming somewhat thick-skinned and impervious to the trauma? But even a first reading of the novels on the theme reveals that none of these arguments really hold. On the contrary, quite a significant portion of the literature on the subject displays deep sensitivity to the problem and is able to communicate both the angst and the pain.

In the current scenario, with the proliferation of public media, both print and audio-visual, the attractiveness of the theme is fuelled by the unwavering coverage and reportage. This thriving industry, which quite often goes overboard, imbues it with new meaning and currency. This display of almost voyeuristic pleasure, both on the part of the reporter and the audience, of the camera and the written word, is especially pertinent where terror literature is concerned. Voyeurism, reprehensible though it is, is an innate human instinct, marked particularly with a

strange fascination with the morbid and the violent. This instinct had brought throngs to witness the public burning of witches at the stake in various parts of the world in the 15th and 16th centuries, and in Salem, at the end of the 17th century; it had impelled crowds to converge in squares to view the public hangings in 19th century England, and in India, both in colonial and post-Independence times, it has beckoned audience to the spectacle of *sati*.[20] Terrorist attacks have excited similar attention, as the international coverage of 9/11 has more than amply demonstrated. Media, literature and film have been quick to respond and have been almost simultaneous in their coverage. In the light of this observation, an extremely uncomfortable question arises, a question that cannot be sidestepped: do the fictional accounts on terrorism by writers in India—and this question may well be asked of all writers across the world—give evidence of a kind of voyeuristic pleasure in both the writer and the reader?

It emerges that the fictional response to terrorism is highly loaded and varied: at times, it displays this dubious pleasure; at others it shows the anguish, the torment, the horror, the trauma it provokes. At times, rather infuriatingly, it is symptomatic of both this and that. It is important to keep all these possible readings in mind to get an insight into the fiction written on terrorism. But whatever the perception, it is quite clear that the theme has a singular appeal for writers who are reasonably assured of success because it holds a similar attraction for readers. Displaying varying degrees of personal commitment, bringing different levels of sophistication and expertise, these writers have come to establish the tantalizing sub-genre of what I will call, the post terrorist novel, teasing—nay demanding—serious critical engagement.

Notes

[1] Robin S. Ngangom, 'Native Land', In *New Statesman and Society,* London, 14 July 1995, p. 41.

[2] Mirza Waheed, *The Collaborator,* London: Viking, 2011.

[3] Basharat Peer, *Curfewed Night,* New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2010.

[4] Bhavani Iyer, *Outlook*, 30 May 2005, p. 92.

[5] On the Charlie Rose show on Iowa Public Television, dated 30 March 2005. Also quoted by Rachel Donadio, 'Truth is stranger than fiction', *The New York Times* online (7 Aug, 2005).

[6] Ian McEwan, *Saturday,* London: Jonathan Cape, 2005.

[7] A few of these are: Don DeLillo, *Falling Man,* New York: Scribner, 2007. John Updike, *Terrorist,* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Paperback), New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005, Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, New York: Viking Adult, 2004.

[8] Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines,* New Delhi*:* Ravi Dayal, 1988.

[9] Noam Chomsky, 'Distorted Morality: America's War on Terror?' Delivered at Harvard University, February 2002. (http://www.chomsky.info/talks/200202—02.htm accessed 17 August 2013).

[10] Robin S. Ngangom, 'A Libran Horoscope', Unpublished poem, 2000. Quoted in Robin S. Ngangom, 'Poetry in a Time of Terror', Sarai Reader, 2006: Turbulence, pp. 422–430. (http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/06-turbulence/03_robin.pdf accessed 18 August, 2013).

[11] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1970, English ed, originally pub 1966), p. 320.

[12] I have been talking of the importance of the 'little' history on diverse occasions, at various locations: Udaipur, Manchester and Jamia Millia Islamia, as evidence of the national character and identity.

[13] Linda Orr, 'The Revenge of Literature: A History of History', *New Literary History,* Vol. 18, No. 1, Studies in Historical Change (Autumn, 1986), The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 1–22.

[14] Foucault too refers to such a construction when he talks of the 'microphysics of power'.

[15] Foucault (2001), *Fearless Speech,* Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), p. 74.

[16] There has been a major debate about whether terrorism is better called 'Islamic' or 'Islamist'. See Hayri Abaza, 'Is it Islamic or Islamist', *The Newsweek Magazine,* October 22, 2010. Abaza is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/10/22/is-it-islamic-or-islamist.html (Accessed 1 July 2013).

I do not want to get into any hair splitting about the rightness or wrongness of the terms. Whatever the fine print in this controversy, I use Islamic not to denote any intrinsic predilection towards violence, or support to terror from the religion itself but to indicate that the religion has been co-opted, misused for an alibi and a rationale for the violent insurgency. I suppose that is what Abaza's 'Islamist' is meant to denote. Of course, Abaza's intention was to use this distinction to talk about the philosophy and sanctity of the religion. In the present context, as long as the meaning is clear, it is immaterial which term is used.

[17] Jammu and Kashmir, Mumbai, Punjab and the North Eastern states have seen the maximum terrorist activity.

[18] For further details, refer South Asia Terrorism Portal. www.satp.org/satpotp/site.htm

[19] Saadat Hasan Manto (1912–1955), Indian born, Pakistani story writer, was a departure in that he responded to the Partition immediately after the experience. Some of his famous stories were 'Bu' (Odour), 'Khol Do' (Open It), 'Thanda Gosht' (Cold Meat), and 'Toba Tek Singh'.

[20] *Sati* is a reprehensible social custom which entailed the burning alive of a widow on the pyre of her deceased husband. This custom, opposed by nineteenth century reformers like Raja Ram Mohun Roy, continued beyond the official ban of 1829, right into contemporary times. In fact, this fascination with *sati* created a hue and cry as recently as in 1987 when thousands gravitated to the site of the funeral pyre of Roop Kanwar (c. 1969–4 September 1987), when not only was the *sati* witnessed, but she was also elevated to the level of an icon, a goddess. Roop Kanwar was an 18 year old Rajput woman who immolated herself on the pyre of her husband on 4 September 1987 at Deorala in Rajasthan, India. She had been married for eight months to Maal Singh Shekhawat who had died a day earlier at age 24. They had no children. The crowds that witnessed her becoming *sati* hailed her as a *sati mata* — a 'sati' mother, or pure mother. The event raised a public hue and cry in urban India, bringing modern Indian ideology in confrontation with a regressive traditional one.

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