

Violence, Trauma And The Politics Of The Body In Bapsi Sidhwa's Fiction

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Abstract

This research article examines the representation of violence and trauma in the fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa, with particular emphasis on how the human body becomes a site of political, cultural and gendered conflict. Drawing on trauma theory, body politics and postcolonial criticism, the study analyzes selected works such as *Cracking India* and *The Pakistani Bride* to explore how physical and psychological suffering are narrated as consequences of communal violence and patriarchal power structures. The article argues that Sidhwa's fiction moves beyond historical documentation to offer an ethical engagement with pain, memory and survival. By foregrounding wounded bodies and fractured identities, Sidhwa challenges dominant nationalist and patriarchal discourses and asserts literature's role in bearing witness to trauma.

Keywords

Bapsi Sidhwa; Trauma Studies; Violence; Body Politics; Partition Literature; Patriarchy; Postcolonial Feminism; Gendered Suffering; Minority Identity; Ethical Witnessing

Introduction

Bapsi Sidhwa is widely recognized for her courageous engagement with some of the most traumatic moments in South Asian history, particularly the Partition of India and its enduring social consequences. As a Pakistani Parsi woman writer, Sidhwa occupies a liminal position that enables her to narrate violence from the margins rather than from dominant nationalist perspectives. Her fiction repeatedly foregrounds **violence inflicted upon vulnerable bodies**, especially those of women and minorities, revealing how historical and cultural forces operate through physical and psychological suffering.

This article explores how violence and trauma are central to Sidhwa's narrative vision. Rather than treating violence as a mere historical event, Sidhwa examines its **afterlife**—how it continues to shape memory, identity and everyday existence. Using insights from trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Veena Das and thinkers of power and the body like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, this study argues that Sidhwa's fiction represents violence as both a personal and political phenomenon, inscribed upon the human body.

Theoretical Framework: Trauma, Power and the Body

Trauma theory provides a useful framework for understanding Sidhwa's narrative strategies. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an experience that overwhelms the mind's capacity to comprehend it fully, returning later through fragmented memories and haunting repetitions. In *Cracking India*, trauma is

not narrated in linear or complete form; instead, it emerges through disjointed recollections, silences and childlike perceptions.

Elaine Scarry's concept of pain as something that resists language is equally significant. According to Scarry, physical pain destroys language and isolates the sufferer. Sidhwa's characters frequently struggle to articulate their suffering, especially women whose pain is socially normalized or dismissed. This linguistic inadequacy underscores the intensity of their trauma.

Michel Foucault's ideas on power and the disciplined body help illuminate how violence operates systematically in Sidhwa's texts. Patriarchal customs, communal ideologies and nationalist fervor exert control over bodies, particularly female bodies, turning them into instruments of honor, revenge, or dominance.

Partition as Traumatic Experience in *Cracking India*

Cracking India offers a deeply personal account of the Partition of 1947, narrated through the eyes of Lenny, a young Parsee girl. The choice of a child narrator is crucial, as it reflects the incomprehensibility of large-scale violence. Lenny witnesses events she cannot fully understand, mirroring Caruth's notion of trauma as an experience that defies immediate comprehension.

Violence in the novel is sudden and transformative. Friends become enemies, neighborhoods become battlegrounds and trust disintegrates. The body becomes the primary site where communal hatred is enacted. Mutilated corpses, assaulted women and displaced refugees populate the narrative landscape, turning ordinary spaces into zones of terror.

The abduction of Ayah stands as the novel's most traumatic moment. Ayah's body becomes a symbol of violated humanity, caught between competing communal desires. This episode demonstrates how women's bodies are used as markers of communal honor and humiliation. Ayah's suffering is not only personal but emblematic of the countless women silenced in Partition histories.

Everyday Violence and Patriarchal Control in *The Pakistani Bride*

While *Cracking India* depicts extraordinary historical violence, *The Pakistani Bride* exposes the **ordinary violence** embedded in social customs. The novel narrates the life of Zaitoon, a young woman forced into marriage within a rigid tribal society. Unlike the sudden brutality of Partition, the violence here is slow, repetitive and normalized.

Veena Das's concept of "violence entering the everyday" is particularly relevant. Zaitoon's suffering is not marked by a single traumatic event but by continuous subjugation—physical abuse, emotional terror and constant surveillance. Her body is treated as property, regulated by male authority and cultural codes.

Judith Butler's theory of bodily vulnerability helps explain Zaitoon's precarious existence. Her life is deemed expendable within a system that prioritizes male honor over female survival. The threat of death looms constantly, reinforcing how patriarchal societies legitimize violence in the name of tradition.

Silence, Speech and the Female Experience of Trauma

One of the most striking features of Sidhwa's fiction is the tension between silence and speech. Women often endure suffering without the possibility of articulation. Their trauma remains unspoken, reinforcing their marginalization.

Elaine Scarry's assertion that pain destroys language is evident in Sidhwa's female characters, who lack both social authority and narrative agency. When women speak, they are frequently ignored or punished. Silence becomes both a sign of oppression and a survival strategy.

However, Sidhwa's act of writing itself becomes a form of resistance. By narrating women's suffering,

she breaks cultural silences and forces readers to confront uncomfortable realities. Literature thus becomes a space where suppressed pain finds expression.

Minority Identity and Ethical Witnessing

As a Parsi writer, Sidhwa brings a minority perspective that complicates dominant narratives of nationhood. Her characters often exist on the margins of power, allowing her to critique violence without endorsing communal loyalties.

Achille Mbembe's concept of *necropolitics*—the power to decide who may live and who must die—resonates strongly with Sidhwa's depiction of Partition and patriarchal societies. Women, minorities and the poor are consistently positioned as disposable lives.

Sidhwa's fiction functions as ethical witnessing. She does not offer solutions or heroic resolutions; instead, she insists on remembering suffering. This insistence challenges readers to acknowledge violence as a shared human responsibility rather than a distant historical event.

Conclusion

Bapsi Sidhwa's fiction presents violence and trauma not as isolated incidents but as deeply embedded social realities that shape bodies, identities and memories. Through her nuanced portrayal of wounded bodies and silenced voices, she exposes the mechanisms through which power operates in postcolonial and patriarchal societies.

By engaging with trauma theory and body politics, this study demonstrates that Sidhwa's work is not merely historical or feminist fiction, but a profound ethical exploration of human vulnerability. Her narratives compel readers to bear witness to suffering that is often erased from official histories. In doing so, Sidhwa affirms literature's capacity to challenge violence, preserve memory and reclaim marginalized lives.

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