

Three Literary Meditations on the Problem of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Postcolonial India

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If we had a keen vision and a feeling for all human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is the quickest of us walk about well wadded in stupidity.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Violence on a mass scale: have we ever known difference, ever known our selves, without the corrosive and shaping effects of such violence? How could it be otherwise, for here is a partial and selective list of the numbers killed by mass violence in the 20th century: killed by the Nazis, 15 to 25 million; killed by Stalin, 20 million (or is it 30?); killed during World War II, 55 million; dead during the Partition of India, perhaps 1 million; killed during the Vietnam War, 2 to 3 million; killed by the Pol Pot regime, 1.6 million; massacred in Rwanda in 1994-95, perhaps a million; still dying in Sudan in the last two decades, 1.9 million and counting. Each of these statistics, and others like them, are contentious, but debates about their accuracy scarcely qualify the stunning impact of the numbers themselves. In sum, in the 20th century two hundred million people were eliminated—murdered or starved—in order to serve political ends of one kind or another. What might follow such a statement of numbers, stated without explanatory details, without political and historical framing? Only an impasse, I suspect, a conceptual blockage as the mind struggles to comprehend such enormity, one which features human bodies but only in their absence, in their diminishing into the massed numbers at hand.

What if we were to work with smaller numbers: take Iraq for instance. If over a million Iraqis and others are dead because of this war (as the UK-based Opinion Research Business estimated in January 2008¹), or 95,412-104,103, as Iraq Body Count, an organization that scrupulously checks on each death (and thus suggests itself that its numbers probably understate deaths), are

we better able to comprehend what that means?² Or a much smaller number—is 5344 dead US soldiers a number comprehensible enough for us to, as the colloquialism goes, bend our minds around?³ Where does the contemplation of these numbers lead us? What byways of thought and syntax allow us to both register such numbers and to incorporate them into a political or human calculus? Or can we only note these numbers without dwelling on them, that is, only register them by reifying them into abstractions insulated from any acts of empathy or imagination that insist on a fundamental continuity between them and us—wherever or whoever the “they” are and wherever or whoever the “us”? (In any case, is it possible to empathise with large numbers of the dead?) Is there anything in these numbers then but the threat that any attempt to enliven them will overwhelm thought itself, will produce an aporia from which the mind can emerge only via a detour into indifference?

So far we speak only of the dead, dispersed into statistics, as we begin to think about their power to shape our ideas of difference and of ourselves. We need to factor in dislocations of an equally massive volume—millions of people wrenched from the contexts they know of as home and transported into slavery and indentured labour in lands far away; millions of others moved by economic opportunity or despair, yet others forced away from land and place by the dictates of states or local powers. And what of those forced to stay, denied a desired mobility and possibility by borders, provinces, nations? Does not such sequestration precipitate modes of being and of

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understanding as circumscribed by political circumstance as those that follow upon mass death or dislocation? If the record of mass violence in the twentieth century is at the same time a record of the self-interest that motivates groups, states and nations, then its social and cultural import is comprehensive enough for it to become one of the defining axes of modernity itself, and of the making of individuals and collectivities across the globe. The insistent use of, and more general knowledge about, techniques of mass destruction—from weapons to crematoria to work camps—produces a steady drumbeat of death and deprivation against which those who live define themselves, either in triumph or in abject fear, or more likely via a combination of feelings: “There but for the grace of . . . (and you can fill in the blank here—my religion, my class, my gender, my race) go I.”

In our accounts of self-making, both psychoanalytic and materialist conceptions have emphasised the mirror-circuits of alterity, the process in which the self achieves definition in an engaged intimacy, a particular identification, with that which is not the self (the other). Appropriately, gender, race, class and sexuality have been the analytical foci that trace the precipitation of individual and collective identities, and which make clear the ways in which we live in difference. There are of course other axes of self-definition, nation and religion being the most prominent. Similarly, in thinking of the place of violence on a mass scale in the making of the modern world, we might want to make visible its power to mould identities and behaviour. The stories we tell of the destruction of societies or peoples, or the everyday sense we have of mass death and demolition in our own moment, are crucial to the psychic and cultural determinants of our subjectivity. Here, the operations of alterity might be understood as the mirror-play of self and statistical others, those who, in the past or in the present, are subject to mass violence. Shadowing the experiential difficulties enforced by the power of national, class, gender, racial, and sexual differences lies another modality of difference, one that sets existence itself against the deathly record of those subject to mass violence.

This is perhaps an odd preamble to an essay entitled “Three Literary Meditations on the Problem of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Postcolonial India,” except that I wish to suggest that it is precisely such memories of orchestrated mass violence that inform literary articulations of the urgencies and difficulties of Hindu-Muslim relations in India (I should state that my focus will be on avowedly secular representations of the causes and effects of such violence). In practice, such secular, determinedly non-partisan writing does not much

explore what we might style the benevolent forms of secular ideology. Literary texts rarely remain content to explore the lived possibilities of the socio-cultural ideal that is “Sarvadharmā sambhava,” the unofficial credo of Indian constitutionalism. Rather, these literary texts derive their creative energies from an often fearful engagement with the miseries precipitated by communal violence. While there is no gainsaying the power of individual acts of violence to disrupt lives and everyday rhythms, the civilian and state forms of mass violence have the capacity not only to dislocate and to destroy, but to fundamentally alienate entire communities from the land and labour that historical practice had made their own. In so far as who we are is so often a product of where we come from and whether or not we have an unquestionable right to claim that space as home, the aftershocks of communal violence shake not only lives but community memories, just as surely as they render unstable community futures.

This concern with alienated belonging informs the three literary texts I read here: a novel by Amitav Ghosh, a short story by Swayam Prakash, and a poem by Agha Shahid Ali, all of which grapple with the power of sustained or occasional episodes of violence on the subcontinent to forge national or subnational identities. Each text features a different form of violence: Ghosh’s novel contemplates riots; Prakash’s story points to the damage done to an individual by a staged quarrel and a beating, when it is made clear that the beating is a pointed message designed to enforce social and religious subordination; Shahid Ali’s poem is an impassioned lover’s lament for a syncretic cultural and psychic existence destroyed by militant activism and state-sponsored violence.

I will begin with a gripping moment in Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Shadow Lines*: the narrator, a boy in Calcutta, is one of several terrified schoolboys cowering in their school bus as it careens away from a mob of rioters. The day is January 10, 1964, and trouble on the streets has caused their school to be shut down early, and now the bus, on the route home, comes under attack. In the face of rioters, the bus driver abandons his route and drives to safety, but the boys no longer know where they are, and the narrator’s fear extends to all around him: “The streets had turned themselves inside out: our city had turned against us.”⁴ What follows is an extraordinary passage, a meditation on fear that is dense with psychological, cultural and geo-political insight:

That particular fear has a texture you can neither forget nor describe. It is like the fear of the victims of an earthquake, of people who have lost faith in the stillness of the earth. And yet it is not the same. It is without analogy, for it is not comparable

to the fear of nature, which is the most universal of human fears, nor to the fear of the violence of the state, which is the commonest of modern fears. It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world—not language, not food, not music—it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror. (204)

For those familiar with the novel, or indeed with the subcontinent, it will be clear that this riot—the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror—is one between Hindus and Muslims. In this section of the novel, Ghosh points to many instances of mirroring: the riots that break out in Calcutta, pitting the majority Hindu community against the Muslim minority echo anti-Hindu riots in Khulna and Dhaka in Muslim-majority East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Each of these riots is sparked by events in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, 1200 miles away, but the simultaneous effect they have in Calcutta and Dhaka—cities in two different nations—confirm just how closely these cities remain bound to each other. In 1947, maps drawn to enforce the partition of British India into the independent nations of Pakistan and India divided colonial Bengal into two parts, ostensibly to free each part into separate national sovereignties. But in 1964, in their common response to events elsewhere, Calcutta and Dhaka seem to the narrator to be “inverted image(s) of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free—our looking-glass border” (233).

Ghosh's novel explores many of the paradoxes of modern state-formation, and the role of violence and trauma within it, touched upon here, particularly those exemplified in the creation of Pakistan and India in 1947 (and of Bangladesh in 1971). But before I move on to those paradoxes, I want to call attention to another passage in the novel in which the narrator meditates upon the “logic” of a riot, or rather, of rioting as an ironic assertion of people's collectivity:

the madness of a riot is a pathological inversion, but also therefore a reminder, of that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of government, for it is in the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples.

The theatre of war, where generals meet, is the stage on which states disport themselves: they have no use for memories of riots. (230)

This is, to me, a breath-taking formulation: riots as

perverse, inverted reminders of the bonds of people independent of the government, prior that is, to the mediation of the apparatus of the modern state. In this reading, a Hindu-Muslim riot in Calcutta or Dhaka is violence that, rather than deny collectivity, in fact confirms commonality; this idea returns us to the notion of the “looking-glass” divide—the violent enactment of difference that confirms only similarity.

The sheer counter-intuitive power of Ghosh's formulation should not cause us to forget, however, that riots are experienced, and for the most part understood, as orchestrated, directed, motivated violence. Social scientists and journalists who have studied and reported on the recurring riots that have been a feature of life in the subcontinent have produced compelling analyses of the ways in which riots, like pogroms, are sanctioned, prepared for, and otherwise made part of larger political and socio-economic agendas. The model of the riot that emerges is less that of the conflagration sparked-off by a carelessly thrown match as that of the deliberate stock-piling of flammable materials in wait for the opportune moment when a lit match can do the most damage.⁵ Riots are often occasions when lands and properties can be annexed, business competitors destroyed, minority or lower-caste populations “taught a lesson” or reminded of their subordination, or a polarized political climate created so that caste or religion-based ‘voting blocs’ can emerge in democratic elections that follow. Riots, that is, are instrumental and purposive; it is another matter that they are uncontrolled, unpredictable and cannot be calibrated. Often, the state is not exempt from the partisan deployment of violence that marks riots; the state and its various organs of public security—the police and the judiciary—do after all represent the accrued, institutionalized authority of social and economic elites, and act in the perceived best interests of these elites.

Ghosh's phrasing does not of course suggest that riots just happen or are incomprehensible as social phenomena; he does however emphasize that the riots he writes about, and perhaps riots in the subcontinent more generally, are imbricated in the modern history of India and Pakistan, and in the making of Indians and Pakistanis, Muslims and Hindus. The specific history that Hindu-Muslim riots repeat messily on the street and in neighborhoods is that which is meant to have been resolved politically in the creation of the independent nations of India and Pakistan. It is also true of course that in spite of, or more likely, because of, this history, crucial subnational and national identities—Hindus and Muslims, Indians and Pakistanis—on the subcontinent seem unable or unwilling to align themselves into the singular existences mandated by Partition.

This thumbnail sketch of political and identitarian complexity might remind us of the powerful reasons why Muslim lives in India are lived under the long shadow of Partition, as it were. Even as Muslims have been enormously successful members of India's political, cultural, military, intellectual, educational, and business elites, Muslims at large are held to be both 'responsible' for Partition and themselves evidence that its equation of religion and homeland represents a failed ideological project (this is true even when there is not accompanying attempt to de-legitimize the sovereign states of Pakistan or Bangladesh). Every right-wing Hindu political party has its own coercive version of the conditions under which Muslim citizens of India must perform their citizenship, whether this is articulated as a benevolent vision of a tolerant Hindu Mother India welcoming all into her embrace or a more forthright and aggressive argument for India as a Hindu Rashtra, home only to those who will live within that ideal. For right-wing Hindu politicians and priests in India, constitutional secularism is a mistaken mandate—that they are in this no different from the theocratic visions of any other form of religious fundamentalism, whether Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, hardly requires saying.

It is important to note here that the Partition of British India is of course understood very differently in Pakistan, not as the end result of a monumental colonial plot, nor as a national tragedy, but in fact as the inauguration and realization of national possibility. Whatever else Hindu right-wing ideologues might say about the culpability of the Muslim League in the making of Partition, they have no theoretical problem with the founding of Pakistan as an Islamic state, putatively home to the Muslims of the subcontinent, precisely because this model of the nation allows them to bolster their claim that India is necessarily the homeland of Hindus. And for many Muslims in India, Partition is kept alive in its fearful local reiterations: each time there is rioting, or police action, against communities of Muslims, or political parties build entire campaigns around efforts to remind Muslims of their subordinate place in India, the events of 1947, and the idea of Pakistan as the Muslim homeland, are invoked. Swayam Prakash's short story "Partition" makes the same point, but does so at the level of an individual, Kurban bhai. Now a shopkeeper in a small northern Indian town, he was a student at the time of Partition and independence. Following upon the decisions of well-known Muslims, with whom he identifies, to stay in India, he struggles to find a livelihood, till by dint of hard work and honesty, he establishes a small shop. He prospers and becomes the center of a culturally secular, syncretic literary community and begins to participate in the civic life of

the town. This charmed circle is disrupted one day when a Hindu cart-driver, on commission from his employer, a politically-connected lawyer, deliberately stages a fight with him, beats him and calls him, not Kurban bhai, as he is known to all, but "Miyan," converting the term into a pointed insult. The police do nothing to help, and the lawyer's political and judicial connections ensure that even Kurban bhai's Hindu friends rally around only weakly.

Kurban Bhai's life is turned upside down, and his thoughts return to the axes of identity and belonging confirmed in Partition that he had denied all his life:

these people consider us to be a liability even though we earn our bread through hard work. Why didn't I migrate to Pakistan? I could have lived in abject poverty without abuses being hurled at me. Shame on me! Shame on my existence! Shame on such a life! Allah! Ya Allah!⁶

And later, in anger against not just a history but a nationalist historiography that he now understands to be complacent, he bursts out:

What rotten stuff do you teach in the name of history? You were saying that Partition happened. Don't talk in the past tense. It's not over yet. It's happening—each moment, each hour. (116)

The story ends with Kurban bhai, now alienated from his literary friends, joining other Muslims in Friday prayer. Accompanying this conclusion is the author's appeal to his reader: "The ending of this story is not a happy one," he writes. "I do not want you to read it. But if you read it through, please consider whether the story could have read differently. A good ending? If yes, how? (116).

The appeal Swayam Prakash, the author of the story and a Hindu, makes to his readers is one that is reiterated in a variety of secular media in India: how do well-meaning Hindu and Muslim citizens arrive at a happy or "good ending" to stories of shared but easily polarized lives? This is not simply a matter of good will and noble intentions, of making sure that bullying Hindu lawyers and politicians do not play the religion card against Muslims whose public presence they find unacceptable. This short story allows us to understand some of the historical and ideological difficulties that frame Muslim lives in India, and which complicate an avowedly secular and humanist text like this one. The story makes clear that the reason Kurban bhai begins to bother both aggressive Hindus and some of his fellow Muslims is because of the company he keeps: "lecturers, professors, journalists," all attracted to his store because it had become a "venue for discussions and debates" (112). He stops attending Friday prayers, though he keeps up his contributions to the madarsa, and then begins to attend

political meetings, which leads "his Muslim brethren" to warn him that "Politics is not meant for us. . . . If you want us to live in peace, don't get embroiled in these matters. . . . Now, if we have to live here, what's the point of messing around . . . ?" (114).

For the unnamed narrator of the story, who is one of those "lecturers, professors, journalists," Kurban bhai's road to civic participation and political belonging comes via a shared literary culture, one that moves him away from the parochial rituals of faith and into an engagement with the composite culture around him. But equally, in the imagination of the story, the only recourse Kurban bhai has after he is insulted and attacked as a Muslim is in the renewed practice of his religion: he returns to his fellow Muslims and to Friday prayer. To be sure, the story does make clear that the lawyer-politician who arranges to humiliate him and deny him judicial redress is powerful enough to make certain that even those who wish to help Kurban bhai can do nothing, and thus reminds us about the crucial role of state apparatuses. Only when Kurban bhai recognizes, as do his friends, that he can expect no support from the police or the judiciary does he give up on his painstaking efforts to rebuild the sense of citizenship and national belonging that had been so traumatically disrupted by the events of Partition. Swayam Prakash's short story insists upon the important role that the state must play in allowing minority citizens their rights; when state institutions are compromised, or worse, when they actively abet majoritarian agendas and help generate a palpable sense that minorities must live on terms dictated by majority interests (often masquerading as "national" interests), then citizens turn to the parochial forms of religion.

That said, it is also clear that the story itself can imagine no denouement other than to return the Muslim subject—the would be political citizen—to an insular religious identity. It is unlikely that a story about a Hindu citizen subject to coercion and humiliation would end with him turning to the rituals of his faith, and even if that was the case, it is entirely unlikely that the narrator of such a story would offer such an ending to his readers as a challenge to the making of the nation, or as an instance of the endlessly repeated traumas of Partition. But here, even in this instance of the secular Indian (and Hindu) imagination, the Muslim citizen is understood as suspended uneasily between public cultural and political participation and an atavistic return to a sectarian identity; alienated from his supposedly progressive friends, denied by the institutions of civic authority, Kurban bhai can only turn to the masjid. Perhaps the questions the author poses to his readers: "The ending of this story is not a happy one. . . . I do not want you to

read it. But if you read it through, please consider whether the story could have read differently. A good ending? If yes, how?" mark not just the failure of civic activism but the limits of the secular artistic imagination, which grapples with religious difference but does not always know how quite to escape its polarizing divides.

I began this essay by calling attention to Amitav Ghosh's meditation on the fact that, seventeen years after Partition, an event in Srinagar, in the extreme north of India, causes identical responses in Calcutta and Dhaka, emphasizing links that were meant to be severed by the independence of Pakistan and India. Before 1947, violence between groups mobilized as Hindus and Muslims was understood as internecine; in 1964, riots are still internecine, except that they mirror each other on either side of a national frontier. This legacy of violence in the making of national and subnational identities in India and Pakistan is one—and this will be my last instance of the afterlife of Partition in the subcontinent—that defines the politics and now the culture, of Kashmir. I will not retell here the complicated history that allowed, shortly after Independence, Jammu and Kashmir, a princely state with its own treaty-based relations with colonial Britain, to become a pawn in the larger political and territorial ambitions of India and Pakistan. By the end of 1948, Kashmir was bifurcated—one part to the northwest under the control of Pakistan, which Pakistanis call "Azad (Free) Kashmir" and the Indian government understands as "POK" ("Pakistan Occupied Kashmir); the other, adjoining the provinces of Jammu and Ladakh, part of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Kashmir was and is one of the few administratively defined provinces in India which has a predominantly Muslim majority, and this, put together with the fact that it adjoins Pakistan, makes it the focus of political and military contention. For obvious reasons, Kashmir became important to nationalist self-definition in both Pakistan and India: for the former, a territorially adjacent Muslim-majority province was necessarily a part of a Muslim homeland, for the latter, Kashmir's particular history and culture allowed it to be part of India, and living proof that India is a secular nation.

For a great many Kashmiris, both Hindu and Muslim, their daily lives suggested a mosaic of Islamic and Hindu customs; or perhaps more accurately, folk practices had not been rigidly bifurcated via religious proscriptions of one form or another. Even at the level of religious idiom, Kashmiris (and there are well-known instances of such syncretism elsewhere in India) shared the legacy of several saintly figures: a Sufi teacher, Sheikh Noor-uddin is Nund Rishi to Hindus, a Hindu religious mystic, Lalleshwari is revered as Lalla Ded (Grandmother Lalla)

throughout the valley, where her spiritual epigrams and aphorisms have become part of everyday speech. Such syncretism itself is of course now held hostage by religious fundamentalism and polarization, and by twenty years of great violence. The last two decades of political despair have resulted in the exodus of most of the Hindus who live in Kashmir (4000 still remain), and the suspension of most democratic processes, even as there is now an "elected" government in place. Sadly, in these years Kashmir has been defined more by violence than by any other feature of collective life—estimates suggest that 70000 people have died, victimized by the army, the local police, the central paramilitary forces, as well as by those militants who fight in their name.

Violence of this magnitude warps people as well as institutions, and leaves little untouched. This is not the place for an accounting of the brutalizing effects of violence in Kashmir, but it is an opportunity to examine—in keeping with the rest of this essay—how a contemporary poet represents the despoiling power of internecine strife in the making and unmaking of Kashmiris. I speak now of Agha Shahid Ali whose wonderful collection of poems *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) mourns a people and a city bereft. It understands Srinagar as a city under siege, in which life still pulsates towards a different future, but a future which can only be limned in the idiom of poetry. In "A Pastoral" (the future and the past can only be imagined as pastoral) he writes to a Hindu friend:

We shall meet again, in Srinagar,
by the gates of the Villa of Peace,
our hands blossoming into fists
till the soldiers return the keys
and disappear. Again we'll enter
our last world, the first that vanished
in our absence from the broken city.

The poet imagines their return, and writes:

The glass map of our country,
still on the wall, will tear us to lace—
We'll go past our ancestors, up the staircase,
holding their wills against our hearts. Their wish
was we return—forever!—and inherit (Quick, the bird
will say) that to which we belong, not like this—
to get news of our death after the world's.⁷

A glass map as a mirror of forgotten selves renews the past into the future, beyond the blood-letting of the present: this is the historical vision that guides Shahid Ali's poems in this volume. But this poetic hope is not one that informs the volume as a whole. The overwhelming tone is of great sadness, of all that has been lost, of all that cannot perhaps be regained, of lovers that now know each other with a despairing honesty now sharpened into enmity. For instance, in the opening poem, "Farewell," the force of contemporary events transforms the benign and familiar tropology of love songs: the lover-poet pining for his absent beloved, the lover's recognition of the distance that separates them, the lover's sense of his beloved's alienation. Here, the lover-poet mourns, but does so with the awareness that it is not only love that has soured once the beloved has gone—in the absence of the (Hindu) beloved, the state (here the army) has declared open season on all who remain in Srinagar:

At a certain point I lost track of you.

They make a desolation and call it peace.

When you left even the stones were buried:

The defenceless would have no weapons.

The quotation from Tacitus, on the spread of the Pax Romana in Britain—"They make a desolation and call it a peace"—makes a startling link between contemporary Srinagar and the older mode of imperial pacification. This allusion, and a single, brief mention of military power, of the passing of "Army convoys all night like desert caravans," are the only directly political references in the poem. Srinagar now knows the peace of the desert, and only glimmering shadows remind the poet of what once was:

In the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked
in each other's reflections.

Have you soaked saffron to pour on them when they are
found like this centuries later in this country
I have stitched to your shadow?

These images set the stage for a moving meditation on community and its disruption by one who remains in Srinagar rueful about another who is home no more. We do not hear why the absent beloved leaves; indeed there is nothing to suggest that this absence is not voluntary ("When you left," and "In your absence" are the only two phrases that indicate the absence). Indeed political

references are eschewed in favour of an exploration of personal loss, of the loss of self, as the poet dwells on the dynamic, changing relationship between himself and his lost beloved:

At a certain point I lost track of you.
 You needed me. You needed to perfect me:
 In your absence you polished me into the Enemy,
 Your history gets in the way of my memory.
 I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me.
 I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy,
 Your memory gets in the way of my memory:

The stark simplicity of these lines refuses any detail about what constitutes "history" or "memory," but these terms define the modalities of being in the poem. The repetitive, even obsessive circularity of these lines sharpen the paradoxes of melancholic self-constitution forced upon Kashmiris in these times of violence and retribution: the "I" and the "You"—the twin markers of a sundered collectivity—still cleave, no longer as lovers, but, even more closely, as enemies. The poet speaks not only about, but *to*, the absent beloved—who else is there who will hear?

And yet it is the absent one who we are told has "polished" the poet "into the Enemy." This tone of resentment is a reminder that this is not only a poem of romantic loss—though that is its primary idiom—but a poem saturated with the political differences known in Srinagar in the '90s, and one whose paradoxes and ironic turns are sharpened to a fine point. If the absent beloved is in fact the Kashmiri pandit, then their dislocation is here figured as a species of defection, one that robs Kashmiri Muslims of community protections against the violence of a sectarian state ("When you left even the stones were buried:/ The defenceless would have no weapons."). Ironically, this enmity itself is figured as a metaphoric extension of past ties, of intertwined memories:

My memory keeps getting in the way of your history.
 There is nothing to forgive. You won't forgive me.
 I hid my pain even from myself; I revealed my pain
 only to myself.
 There is nothing to forgive. You can't forgive me.
 If only somehow you could have been mine,
 what would not have been possible in the world?⁸

The declarative sentences in these verses switch subject and object, the "I" and the "You," in trying to stabilize a grammar of the un-broken self. Forgiveness becomes key, both in the poet's plaintive and repeated assertion "There is nothing to forgive" and in his immediate awareness that his beloved will not and cannot forgive. Written in a time when the situation in Kashmir allowed no optimism, this poem, even as it memorializes a syncretic culture and identity, is unable to intuit a synthesis of any kind between its key terms: memory, history, forgiveness, the "I" and the "You." The only closure available is that provided by the terms of elegiac longing: "If only somehow you could have been mine, / what would not have been possible in the world?" Such longing for a past before violence, before division, before the enforced logic of partitions, seeks to imagine possibilities and identities resistant to the power of mass violence to sculpt modes of being in the world. Its tones and affect—deeply infused with desire, yet despairing—can be fruitfully counterposed to the vexed rationality of Swayam Prakash's question: "The ending of this story is not a happy one" . . . "I do not want you to read it. But if you read it through, please consider whether the story could have read differently. A good ending? If yes, how? (116).

The internal fissures and historical divides within the subcontinent remind us that civil society is a fragile order always under pressure, that it is a compact constantly requiring renewal. Agencies of the state as well as mobilized groups among the civilian population seem only too often to teeter on the brink of violence, seeking reasons to move against a group, a community, a people. On each occasion a particular fear is invoked to justify such actions, that of the enemy without, but, even more compellingly, the enemy "within," the neighbor who is, to all intents and purposes, like any other such neighbor, indeed not unlike oneself, but who must now be the object of great suspicion. This is the paranoia that underlies generalized conditions of personal and collective suspicion, as it does public and state actions in "defence" of the "way of life" or the nation. As we know, the idea of the nation under threat is powerful and fungible, and most often invoked and manipulated to serve interests more local, and more sectarian, than claimed by the idea of the nation itself. Equally, the material and psychic toll of these processes of retributive communal violence plays a disproportionate role in shaping modes of national and subnational being and belonging. Literary texts are the repository of the overlapping and discordant vocabularies of nationalism, communalism, and individual belonging and action. The three I have called attention to here are themselves different—and differently secular—ways of exploring the difficult and

persistent histories of communal violence and dislocation in India. If their idiom is that of dislocation, loss, and polarized being, it is because they know too well the burdens of the past; if they also insist upon the great urgency of reconciliation, it is because they demand of us the need to imagine different futures.

NOTES

1. http://www.opinion.co.uk/Newsroom_details.aspx?NewsId=120 (accessed on February 18, 2010).
2. <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/> (accessed on February 18, 2010).
3. <http://militarytimes.com/valor/index.php> (accessed on February 18, 2010).
4. Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1988, 203.
5. I will not list the great many studies of riots we have available; one powerful reminder of the "structured" nature of riots is *The Delhi Riots: Three Days in the Life of a Nation*, eds. Uma Chakravarti and Nandita Haksar (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1987), which is a record of the anti-Sikh pogrom in Delhi (between November 1 and 3, 1984) that followed upon the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The editors understand these riots to have been instrumental in the "making of a new minority" (the Sikhs) and as a power-play in the consolidation of Congress Party and Hindu-majoritarian politics after the death of Mrs Gandhi.
6. Swayam Prakash, "Partition," trans. A. Asaduddin, in *Image and Representation: Stories of Muslim Lives in India*, eds. Mushirul Hasan and M. Asaduddin, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, 115.
7. Agha Shahid Ali, "A Pastoral," in *A Country Without a Post Office*, New York: Norton, 1997, 44-45.
8. Readers of Momin Khan Momin will recognize Shahid Ali's silent paraphrase of two lines from Momin's "Asar Us Ko Zarā Nahīn Hotā": "Tum hamāre kisī tarah na hue/ Varna duniya mein kya nahīn hotā" (available at <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/urduetech/ghazalreader/momin01.html>, accessed on March 12, 2010. I am grateful to Rubab Qureshi for this reference.