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The aesthetics of the fragment: Progressivism and literary modernism in the work of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association

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ABSTRACT

Modernism has been retheorized as a global phenomenon, through phrases such as “geomodernism” or “planetary modernism”. This article considers Urdu literary modernism, as it developed in South Asia in the 1930s and 1940s. It offers new readings of canonical texts by writers connected to the All-India Progressive Writers' Association: “Khol Do” by Saadat Hasan Manto, “Subah-e Azadi” by Faiz Ahmad Faiz and “Lajwanti” by Rajinder Singh Bedi. Against Urdu scholarship which views modernism (*jadidiyat*) as a postcolonial phenomenon, the article argues that in their critique of modernity, reinvention of tradition, approach to myth and interest in visuality these texts demonstrate that progressivism should be understood as part of the history of Urdu literary modernism in South Asia. Manto, Faiz and Bedi deployed an aesthetics of the fragment not only to critique Partition and its protocols, but also to investigate Partition as a crisis of nation, modernity and humanity.

KEYWORDS

Urdu literary modernism; All-India Progressive Writers' Association; Indian partition; Saadat Hasan Manto; Rajinder Singh Bedi; Faiz Ahmad Faiz

Modernism has been retheorized as a global phenomenon, using phrases such as “geomodernism” or “planetary modernism”. As Susan Friedman (2015) outlines in *Planetary Modernisms*, such an approach demands “a fundamental rethinking of modernity that posits it as a geohistorical condition that is multiple, contradictory, interconnected, polycentric, and recurrent for millennia and across the globe” (4). Friedman suggests that we see modernism as a field of relations, in which the locally situated is always in conversation with global shifts, interactions and crosscurrents. To understand modernism, she continues, “we need to think about what is put into relation with what and how that relationship takes on different forms at different geo-historical locations” (59). Reframing modernism as “representational rupture”, Friedman enjoins us to “aim to detect the different forms that representational ruptures take in connection with different modernities” (69). This approach allows us to reconsider the work of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA), founded in 1936 to uplift the masses and achieve social and political progress through literature. Paradigmatically aligned with socialist realism, the work of the AIPWA has been considered to be modern but not modernist. Against Urdu scholarship which views modernism (*jadidiyat*) as a postcolonial phenomenon, I argue that

in their critique of modernity, reinvention of tradition, approach to myth, use of imagistic language, and interest in visuality, the texts presented here demonstrate that progressivism should be understood as part of the history of Urdu literary modernism in South Asia. They show not only that the canon of Urdu writers considered modernist should be expanded, but also how modernism served as resource to critique the postcolonial state in South Asia. Building on Friedman's injunction, citing Andreas Huyssen, to open "up the concept of formal ruptures to a wide array of representational engagements with modernity[...] 'thus expanding our notion of innovation' " (71), I argue that progressive writers inaugurated a new modernist language in Urdu that drew deeply from tradition while also transposing it. In "Khol Do" by Saadat Hasan Manto, "Subah-e Azadi" by Faiz Ahmad Faiz and "Lajwanti" by Rajinder Singh Bedi, these writers developed what I call an aesthetics of the fragment, exploring modernity and Partition as rupture and paradox. They generated new modes of expression that comprised both the inauguration of new forms and the repositioning of tradition, which Urdu modernists attempted to reclaim from British colonial critiques that portrayed South Asian literatures as decadent and backward.

Critiquing clock time: Saadat Hasan Manto's "Khol Do"

Saadat Hasan Manto's ([1948] 2017) story "Khol Do" (Open it!) critiques the temporal regimes underpinning the nation. It explores modern clock time as a synecdoche of the nation, and suggests the particular violence of forms of colonial governmentality in South Asia, where modernity has been accompanied by Partition. Manto's relationship to modernism has remained under-explored in the scholarship on his work (Mufti 2007; Jalal 2013; Gopal 2005). Leslie Flemming (1979), in an early book-length study of Manto's work, notes that

in his exploitation of the formal possibilities of the short story, Manto was not especially innovative. Except for the four stories "Bu", "Tobah Tek Singh", "Sarak ke kinare" and "Phundne", he preferred the realistic approach, and except for his invention of the Manto persona, his choice of the various formal aspects of the story was limited to those learned from nineteenth-century European writers. (103)

This assessment is contradicted by later scholars, who note that Manto turned to more experimental literary techniques in his later work; his 1954 story "Phundne", for example, is often regarded as an early modernist short story in Urdu (Wentink 1985, 103). I turn here to one of Manto's best-known stories, "Khol Do" (Open it!), to argue that it presents a modernist emphasis on time and makes a particular critique of modern clock time. I suggest that Manto's interest in clock time reveals the story's underlying critique of modernity. It is the clash of the modern regime of the nation – which has brought "special trains", border exchanges and the dehumanizing logic of religiously determined identities – with the universal human experience of pain, that occupies Manto in "Khol Do" and underpins his critique of the specific modernity established in India and Pakistan at the moment of their independence.

Published in the August 1948 issue of *Nuqush*, the progressive literary journal founded by Ahmad Nadim Qasmi,¹ "Khol Do" briefly and succinctly follows the story of Sirajuddin, "a Muslim father frantically looking for his kidnapped daughter,

Sakina” (Jalal 2013, 153), after arriving in Pakistan via a refugee train that is attacked. It remains one of the most renowned and iconic stories of Partition.

Anna Bernard (2010) points to the fragmentary nature of many Partition narratives, noting that in their imagination of other possible worlds, ones in which the devastating effects of partition(s) have not occurred, fragmented narratives act as “an illustration of the kind of imaginative deconstruction and reassembly that needs to be undertaken if the exclusionary forms of national identity created by partition are to be confronted and undone” (23). Scholars have read Manto’s work as “fragmented” narratives that make visible and challenge the “totality” of the nation, as represented formally by the novel (Mufti 2007; Bernard 2010; Pandey 1992). Yet rather than assailing the nation as the totality that cannot be produced after independence, Bernard rightly points out that Manto’s work “outlines the total social transformation that has taken place” alongside Partition (25).

Manto’s writings on Partition perform a double critique. On the one hand, they qualify as “partition literature”, defined by Bernard as “texts that represent either the event of territorial partition or its consequences” (2010, 10). Yet their criticism of Partition lies not within an analysis of the nation or of the partition itself, but rather within what Manto saw as more totalizing transformations of society with the rise of modern, industrial, urban life within South Asia. He develops a poetics of the fragment, in which a single image or element becomes emblematic of the whole. This single element or image stands out against Manto’s otherwise sparse language.

The story’s opening lines rely on the reader’s knowledge of the event, presenting minimum details to convey setting, time period and historical context:

The special train left Amritsar at two in the afternoon, taking eight hours to reach Mughalpura. On the way several people were killed. Many were wounded, and some just wandered off [*kuch idhar udhar bhatak gaye*]. (Manto 2015, 216)²

This sparse description would have been immediately intelligible to contemporary readers. Its use of the English phrase “special train” instantly evokes the refugee trains that crossed the border in the days preceding and following independence, and that were scenes of communal violence and riots. Readers are trusted to know that the distance between Amritsar and Mughalpura is about 20 kilometres, which would otherwise take about one hour to traverse. The story’s setting is unnamed, allowing it to become more universalized and generic:

when Sirajuddin opened his eyes on the bare, ice-cold ground of the refugee camp, he saw a surging sea of men, women and children swirling around him, and whatever little remaining ability he had to think and comprehend deserted him. (Manto 2015, 216)

By not naming Partition, Manto refocuses attention on the universal and the shared human experience.

“Khol Do” leaves its most important elements unsaid, forcing the reader to read between the lines. This is most evident in the conclusion, in which the story’s ambiguous title is explained:

For a while he [Sirajuddin] stood leaning against the wooden post outside the facility and then he slowly walked inside. There was no one in the room. All he could see was the stretcher with a corpse [*lāsh*] lying on it. [...]

The doctor[...]felt the pulse and, pointing at the window, told Sirajuddin, “Open it!” Sakina’s body [*murdah jism*] stirred ever so faintly on the stretcher. With lifeless hands [*be jān hāthon se*] she slowly undid the knot of her waistband and lowered her shalwar.

“She’s alive! My daughter is alive!” [*Zindah hai ... Meri beti zindah hai!*] Old Sirajuddin screamed with unbounded joy.

The doctor broke into a cold sweat. (Manto 2015, 218)³

In this passage, Manto purposely uses the words corpse (*lāsh*), dead body (*murdah jism*) and lifeless (*be jān*) to suggest that Sakina has already died. One must read between the lines to comprehend the extent of the violence that has been enacted upon Sakina and her body. This stratagem points to the story’s central paradox: at the moment that Sakina’s father celebrates her life, the reader learns that she has endured a “living death” (Das 1996, 76). Veena Das has suggested an alternative reading of this statement as a moment when Sirajuddin wills his daughter to live through his utterance, rejecting the reported widespread practice of men willing their wives and daughters to die rather than sully the family’s honour (77–78).

Within this story on Partition, Manto subtly critiques modernity, which appears in the story as modern clock time. Of the story’s 17 paragraphs, 9 begin with time expressions. For example, the second paragraph begins, “At ten in the morning”, the fourth, “for three full hours”, the eighth, “after six hours”, the eleventh and the thirteenth, “one day”, the fifteenth “around evening”, et cetera.⁴ Temporality was a key concern of late-19th- and early-20th-century Indian fiction, as early novels displaced the “mythic time” of the romance and story (*qissah*) traditions with “historical time” (Khullar 2014, 392; discussing Mukherjee 1999). Yet as Ulka Anjaria (2012) has traced, beginning in the 1880s, major novels such as Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s (1882) *Anandamath* and Rabindranath Tagore’s (1916) *Ghare Baire* challenged realist temporality, leading historical time to emerge as a “full-fledged crisis” in the 1930s, as novelists practised temporal discontinuity. This allowed them to “not only critique the homogenous time of the modern nation-state but also to animate the unthinkable possibility of a heterogeneous nationalism” (Anjaria 2012, 103).

The use of time in “Khol Do” creates a particular narrative rhythm in the story, moving from very specific moments to more indeterminate lengths of time. This creates a particular representation of trauma, in which some events take place slowly and deliberately. Sirajuddin’s waking in the refugee camp, in which he is described as being almost senseless (“his senses were paralyzed. His entire being seemed to be suspended in space”), nevertheless takes place at exactly 10 am. Similarly, Sirajuddin’s wandering through the camp, “like a man possessed”, continues “for three full hours” as he uselessly calls out his daughter’s name (Manto 2015, 216). These exact time references contrast with Sirajuddin’s dazed and traumatized state, suggesting a tension beneath the action, which foreshadows the irony of Sakina’s rape at the hands of Pakistani, Muslim volunteers, the very men who, according to nationalist discourse, are supposed to protect their compatriots. Manto, therefore, suggests on the level of form what he does not represent in words.

The use of time in “Khol Do” also marks a narrative shift, as time changes from fixed periods (three hours, six days later) to the fuzzy “one day” at the story’s mid-point, which occurs exactly when the volunteers, on a rescue mission to Amritsar, encounter Sakina wandering through a field. All time expressions are vague from this

point on in the story, moving to “several days went by”, “one day”, “that evening” and “for a while”. Sakina’s gang rape occurs during one of these time expressions, when one of the volunteers “even took off his jacket and gave it to her because she was feeling quite awkward without her dupatta, and was making repeated but futile attempts to cover her chest with her arms. Several days went by, but Sirajuddin received no news from Sakina” (Manto 2015, 218). Only on a second reading can one realize what has happened. Indefinite, ambiguous lengths of time signal danger in “Khol Do”, as in the uneasy eight hours at the story’s opening that immediately conjure Partition.

In “Khol Do”, Manto subverts standard critiques of Partition by deploying an aesthetics of the fragment, in which modern clock time comes to stand in for modernity. This choice recalls the connections of colonial governmentality in South Asia to “techniques of measurement”, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) reminds us:

From surveys of land and crop output to prospecting for minerals, from measuring Indian brains [...] to measuring Indian bodies, diets, and life spans [...], the British had the length and breadth of India, its history, culture, and society, mapped, classified, and quantified in details that were nothing but precise. (83–84)

Manto’s bare language does not connect the critique of modern clock time to anti-colonial nationalism. Rather, it recalls what Saurabh Dube (2015) has noted for both modernist writers and artists in early-20th-century South Asia: “in formations of modernist imaginaries in South Asia, the density and gravity of artistic interchanges [...] often exceeded the formal influence – intellectual and ideological, aesthetic and political – of anti-colonial nationalism” (94). Manto’s reduction of the nation state to the idea of dehumanizing clock time represents a technique of abstract representation, practised by progressive painters such as S.H. Raza and K.G. Subramanyan (Dalmia 2001; Khullar 2015). It represents a modernist technique of rendering modernity as rupture, shared by modernist artists in South Asia as well as in Paris, London, Munich and New York, yet with particular resonance against the backdrop of British colonialism in South Asia.

“This is not the dawn we waited for”: Faiz Ahmad Faiz and classical Urdu poetry

In his widely known poem “Subah-e Azadi (August 1947)” (Freedom’s Dawn [August 1947]), progressive poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1989, 116–118) reconstructs the conventions of the classical *ghazal* to imbue them with political content. He uncouples the *ghazal* from its classical world view, thereby practising a different aesthetics of the fragment in which the modernist *nazm* deconstructs and reimagines tradition. On the one hand, the work of Faiz, a committed leftist, poet and newspaper editor imprisoned several times for his leftist political leanings, has been read as a combination of old and new. In Gopi Chand Narang’s (2013) words,

Faiz, in spite of his leftist leanings, was not a rebel poet in the real sense of the word. He was an admirer of the classical imagery of Urdu *ghazal*, and his style bears traces of the language of both Ghalib and Iqbal. He had accepted and assimilated much that was in the tradition and used the classical conventions and imagery with such depth and ingenuity

that his poetry reflects at once the heritage of the past and the quest and restlessness of the present. (65–66)

On the other hand, Aamir Mufti (2007) has provocatively argued, “against much of Faiz criticism”, that “the foremost theme of Faiz’s poetry, which defines it as a body of writing, is the meaning and legacy of Partition” (210). I take a middle ground in my reading of “Subah-e Azadi”: I argue that in his reinvention of classical Urdu *ghazal* poetic tropes to convey the paradox of independence and Partition within the 20th-century form of the *nazm*, Faiz establishes a modernist poetic language that reinvents tradition. While much of Faiz’s other work cannot be read as overtly political, “Subah-e Azadi” demonstrates the formal possibility of using classical *ghazal* vocabulary to represent political realities.

Faiz’s manoeuvre should be understood against the backdrop of colonial criticism of tradition, typified by British East India Company administrator Thomas Babington Macaulay’s 1835 pronouncement that a “single shelf” of “a good European library” would surpass “the whole native literature of India and Arabia” (quoted in Mufti 2016, 1). This stinging rebuke of tradition was deeply felt in Urdu literary circles, where Urdu poets Altaf Husain Hali (1837–1914) and Muhammad Husain Azad (1830–1910) spear-headed a movement to modernize Urdu poetry and move it away from classical aesthetics, which were recast as full of “stupid exaggeration and padding and redundancies” (*Avadh Akhbar*, February 2, 1875, quoted in Dubrow 2018, 25). The “natural poetry” movement that Hali and Azad promoted altered the status of tradition in the Urdu canon, as Frances Pritchett (1994) has shown. Faiz’s return to and reinvention of tradition upended the orientalist critique. While Faiz was not the first to repurpose elements of classical *ghazal* aesthetics for political aims (Faruqi 2013), his success in this endeavour effected a radical break. It pioneered a particular modernist language in Urdu, one that drew deeply from tradition but revised, inverted and transposed it.

Faiz’s poetry comprised both classical and new poetic forms such as the *ghazal* (a lyric, with extensive formal requirements) and the *nazm* (usually a free-verse poem), inaugurated in the early 20th century. “Subah-e Azadi” is a *nazm*. Consisting of 3 stanzas of 8, 10 and 7 lines respectively, the poem declares that the dawn of freedom in the Indian subcontinent was marred and night-stricken. Below is my own new, highly literal translation of the poem, which makes visible Faiz’s use of imagery drawn from the world of the classical Urdu *ghazal*:

Freedom’s dawn

August 1947

This stained daybreak, this night-stricken dawn
 This is not the dawn we waited for
 This is not the dawn with whose desire
 Friends set out, [believing] that somewhere
 Would be found
 the stars’ last destination in the heaven’s wilderness
 the shore for the night of weak, gentle waves
 Somewhere will halt the boat of the heart’s grief

When friends set out on the mysterious highways of youth
 How many hands tugged at their skirts/shirts [*dāman*]
 Arms cried out, bodies called from the restless bedrooms of beauty's houses
 But desire for the dawn's face was dear
 The hem [*dāman*] of the beauties of light was near
 Longing was light-footed, weariness was muted
 Now we've heard that darkness has been separated from light [*firāq-e zulmat o nūr*]
 Destination and journey have been united [*visāl-e manzil o gām*]
 The ways of the pained [people] have changed
 The joy of union is sanctioned [*nishāt-e vasl halāl*], the pain of separation
 forbidden [*azāb-e hijr harām*]

The heart's fire, the eye's longing, the soul's burning
 Separation's salve had no effect on any of them
 Where did the morning breeze come from? And where has it gone?
 The street lamp never saw it passing
 The night has become no less heavy
 The moment for the liberation of the eye and heart has not come
 Let us go on! For that destination is still far.
 (Faiz 1989, 116–118; key words and phrases from the original given in italics)

This *nazm* cannot be fully understood without reference to classical Urdu poetic tropes. It begins with two paradoxical poetic images: the speckled, sullied first rays of light at sunrise, and a dawn afflicted by night. This duality of morning and night is familiar from the world of the classical Urdu *ghazal*, in which the lover paradigmatically spends the night sleepless, perhaps recollecting his beloved or perhaps spending the night with him or her. Faiz inverts these tropes in the poem's first two lines, recasting the dawn, a symbol of hope and release from the night's suffering in the classical *ghazal* universe, as the beginning of political freedom. Yet its suffering has not been ended. Without naming the Partition, Faiz employs this poetic trope to suggest disappointment, betrayal and frustrated aims and desires. The last three lines of the first stanza present a series of meaningful tropes from classical Urdu poetry: destination and wilderness, the shore, and the related image of the boat. The destination (*manzil*) is a place of solace in Urdu poetry. One possible destination is the shore, a setting for peace and tranquillity, where one's desires and longings might be released. The shore is also related to a web of established poetic tropes related to water in Urdu poetry: the boat, the water droplet that represents the human soul within the ocean of the divine, waves that break against the shore, and so on. Faiz inverts these tropes, to suggest that the deliverance expected from independence has not happened.

In the second and third stanzas, Faiz continues revising classical poetic imagery to represent Partition. The second stanza's final four lines rely on the audience's familiarity with poetic tropes to obliquely critique the nation's leaders. In Urdu, three of these lines use the conjunctive verb *chukna* (the verbs are: *ho bhi chuka hai* in the fourth and third-to-last lines, followed by *badal chuka hai* in the penultimate line), a verb used to add a sense of completion, or to convey that something has already happened. Faiz juxtaposes these verbs with images that would be impossible in the classical *ghazal* universe. First is the "separation" (*firāq*) of darkness and light. *Firāq* is a highly evocative word in the *ghazal* universe; it is a keyword for the separation of the

lover from the beloved, and of mankind from the divine. Yet Faiz uses it in reference to darkness and light, which can never be truly separated. The heightened emotional resonance of *firāq* is matched by Faiz's use of the word *visāl* in the next line; *visāl* is the opposite of *firāq*, representing union in the mystical sense of the obliteration of the ego in the beloved or in the divine. The last line represents a true reversal: as the audience would know, union (*vasl*) between lover and beloved is not sanctioned in the *ghazal* universe; further, separation (*hijr*) is accepted and expected, not forbidden. By transposing these tropes onto the political reality of independence and Partition, Faiz conveys the paradoxical impossibility of freedom's dawn. He reinvents classical poetic tropes to depict Partition in a modernist reimagining of tradition.

"Subah-e Azadi" performs a particular type of modernist assemblage. Faiz creates a poetic imaginary that purposely disjoins the conventions of the classical Urdu *ghazal* universe from the world view that underpins it. In this breaking and remaking, "Subah-e Azadi" participates in the "imaginative deconstruction and reassembly that needs to be undertaken if the exclusionary forms of national identity created by partition are to be confronted and undone" (Bernard 2010, 23). By joining the classical Urdu *ghazal* to the modernist *nazm*, Faiz extends the aesthetics of the fragment to Urdu poetry, illustrating its potential to serve as political critique.

Writing on walls: Myth and visuality in Rajinder Singh Bedi's "Lajwanti"

Written four years after Partition, Rajinder Singh Bedi's (1951) short story "Lajwanti" considers the return of the female protagonist Lajwanti, after her abduction by Muslims during the family's migration from Pakistan to India during Partition. The story centres on the efforts of Lajwanti's husband, Sunder Lal, in campaigning for the reintegration of abducted women in Ludhiana (Panjab, India), the site of the tale. In its reconstruction of myth and reference to Boccaccio and Byzantine slaves, "Lajwanti" applies a different aesthetics of the fragment to the pain of Partition. Like "Subah-e Azadi", it breaks down and reconstitutes tradition in an imaginative reassembly. Yet unlike that poem, "Lajwanti" transforms tradition into image, using visual language to explore the question of the forcible repatriation of women across the border.

Unlike "Khol Do", "Lajwanti" is explicitly defined by a specific time and place. It directly addresses Partition and its aftermath, and its context is made immediately clear in the opening sentence, "The country was partitioned" (Bedi 2004, 10). The story exists in two versions: an earlier version, included in the Sang-e Meel Press's authoritative collection of Bedi's works, *Majmu'ah* (Bedi 1994), and a later Urdu version, which has been reprinted in collections such as *Apne Dukh Mujhe De Do*, published by the Maktabah-e Jami'ah Press in New Delhi (Bedi 1997). Bedi also produced his own English translation, first published in the anthology *Contemporary Short Stories*, brought out by the Sahitya Akademi in 1967, which follows the later Urdu version.⁵ The major difference between the two versions is the deletion in the later Urdu version and Bedi's English translation of a long, imagistic passage that points to the story's interest in myth and visuality. Before that, two-thirds through the story, Bedi breaks narrative form and includes a long paragraph, present in all versions, that is vaguely symbolist, abstract and purposely dissociated from a specific time and location. The

paragraph occurs immediately before Sunder Lal is reunited with Lajwanti, and thus frames that re-encounter:

Worse were the cold-blooded traders in human merchandise who bartered human flesh and human emotions. [...] Violence had by now become normal and natural to these merchants. There was a time when, at the fairs, transactions were settled under the cover of a handkerchief – the fingers of the buyer and the seller met behind the veil, concluding the change of ownership. But now the handkerchief, too, had been taken away and deals were struck upon sight. [...] This buying and selling, this trade seemed more like a tale of old, in which are described the sales of women in the slave markets of free and prosperous cities. On both sides of the market stand naked women of various climes, contours and complexions, and the Uzbek passes through, stopping before one and then another, disrobing them even in their nakedness, his eyes prying into the betrayed secrets of their nudity. Then he approaches one of them, touching a body with a probing finger, and where the finger touches the flesh, a rosy dimple appears and around it a pale circle and then the rose and the pale rush and run into each other, fusing and changing places. The Uzbek moves ahead and the rejected woman, heavy with the acceptance of defeat, in utter shame and lassitude, clutches her loosened undergarment with one hand and with another tries to hide her face from public gaze. (Bedi 2004, 19)

It is well established that violence against women during Partition helped to reinforce the identities of the Indian and Pakistani nations through its inscription on the female body (Mookerjea-Leonard 2017; Butalia 2000). Bedi both historicizes and dehistoricizes this process, on the one hand pointing to ancient practices of slavery in Central Asia, and on the other hand abstracting the practice, removing it from a specific time and place. He then turns to strategies of symbolist poetry to explore the effect of the (man's) "probing finger" on the flesh, portraying this with imagistic language. The man's violating touch becomes a pair of concentric circles, with the round, rosy dimple echoed by a pale circle (likely the blushing of the skin produced by shame), whose shades of dark and light mix and mingle. Bedi's sentence turns the male touch into an aesthetic experience, producing for the reader a painterly moment focused on colour and shape. The image becomes a symbol of male violation and female shame, enacted upon the body as a non-verbal, physical reaction.

The phrase "tale of old" in the middle of the paragraph cited above, which in the Urdu version is actually "a tale by Boccaccio" (likely referring to *The Decameron*), points to the internationalist affiliations of Bedi and the progressive writers. As has been noted by other scholars, progressive writers' ideas were crafted in London and Paris, and inspired by the ideals of the Russian revolution; the AIPWA's founding members drew from socialist realism, Russian futurism, symbolist poetry by Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Baudelaire, and modernist works like Joyce's *Ulysses* in their use of form (Coppola 2017; Khullar 2014, 392). Progressive writers and artists reworked aspects of Hindu and Greek mythologies as well as Christian iconography in their pieces, "reinvent[ing] their iconic form [by] contextualizing them in the present" (Dalmia 2001, 219). Bedi's references to Boccaccio and, in the next paragraph of the story, Byzantine slaves, index a complex engagement with myth. They embody not a borrowing of Greek or Hindu mythology but rather a fragmented, abstracted and allegorical adaptation of tradition in which myth is broken down into image and then drawn upon allusively.

"Lajwanti" contains an additional passage, present in the earlier version of the Urdu story, but not in the later version or in Bedi's English translation. This section suggests

Bedi's interest in imagistic language and visuality. In this excerpt, which appears at the end of the paragraph cited above, Bedi further develops the theme of the humiliation of women as a global and long-standing process, placing it farther back in history to the Byzantine Empire (330–1453 CE):

Going further back, women didn't even have a sense of shame. They would roam naked in Constantinople's markets and having put on the disguise of Trifera [a tree?], would say to their girlfriend Sisu, "See, Sisu? What cruel buffoon has written on the wall in front of us: 'Beqs [slave girl] ... [sold] to Therasitus ... for two *aveli*'."

And she would say, "two *aveli*?" And Sisu would say, "Men should not be allowed to humiliate us so easily. If I had been Beqs, I would have thoroughly interrogated him." And Sisu walked a little further on when she saw written on the wall: "Mados [village name] Sisu ... to Timon ... for one *mina*."

Sisu went pale for a little while and then she stood under that writing and waited, while the other women would pass by, looking at her longingly and enviously. (Bedi 1994, 600; my translation)

This evocative extract, in which a Byzantine woman named Sisu stands under a wall with strange writing that details her sale for a small amount of money, dramatizes the commodification of female bodies as a painterly image. In its flat, sequential images of loneliness and longing, it foreshadows the interest in murals and wall painting among modernist artists in India in the 1960s and 1970s, who were themselves inspired by wall paintings at Ajanta as well as by the mural movement in Mexico (Khullar 2015). Bedi's image perhaps does not fit with the rest of the story, which may explain its removal from the later Urdu version as well as from Bedi's English translation. Yet I suggest that the passage's final image, of a pale, bloodless Sisu, her paleness the result of either fear or shame, points to the imagistic structure of the story.

"Lajwanti" both responds to contemporary debates about the status of women abducted during Partition – in 1946, Gandhi advised women facing the threat of violence to commit suicide to preserve their chastity, whereas the Government of India between 1947 and 1954 enacted a policy of forcible repatriation, in which women were returned across the border according to religious identity – and criticizes the way nationalist discourse associated women's bodies and the nation. Bedi helped create a new vocabulary for Urdu literary modernism. In his imagistic language and fragmented approach to myth, he transformed Partition's pain and suffering into image and symbol, placing his story firmly within the history of literary modernisms in South Asia.

In their abstract responses to Partition, Manto, Faiz and Bedi each applied what I have called an aesthetics of the fragment. Manto used clock time to critique modernity; Faiz adopted classical *ghazal* aesthetics for political critique in the *nazm*; and Bedi recontextualized myth to explore Partition imagistically. They turned to modernist literary techniques not only to critique Partition and its protocols, but also to investigate the partition as a crisis of nation, modernity and humanity. In doing so, these progressive writers both participated in an emerging international discourse about modernity and its mal-effects, and pioneered a new modernist language deeply rooted in the Urdu literary tradition. This inauguration of modernism rooted in tradition

illuminates the specific trajectory of Urdu literary modernism in the five years following independence.

Conclusion

In 1974, founding member of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association Ahmed Ali recalled the progressive movement's aims as follows:

[The Progressive Writers'] Movement was essentially an intellectual revolt against the outmoded past, the vitiated tendencies in contemporary thought and literature, the indifference of people to their human condition, against acquiescence to foreign rule, enslavement to practices and beliefs, both social and religious, based on ignorance, against the problems of poverty and exploitation, and complete inanity to progress and life. (quoted in Joshi 2002, 207)

In its call to reject the "outmoded past" and what Ali called "the vitiated tendencies in contemporary thought and literature", this statement made plain the progressive movement's critique of tradition. Joshi has described this statement as "a manifesto both for and against modernity" (2002, 207). In its search for progress against the backdrop of colonial domination and the exploitation wrought by capitalism, the progressive movement both responded to modernity and critiqued it. In its stated aims, therefore, the movement fulfils the description of modernist narrative offered by Jessica Berman (2012) in relation to modernist Indian novels in English: "modernist narrative[...] responds aesthetically to social structures, economies, interpersonal relations, and domestic obligations within late colonial India even as it aligns itself with political efforts to change these structures" (223). In their critiques of Partition, but also of the modern and modernizing structures underlying Partition – the imposition of modern state structures and bodily regimes represented by clock time, or the commodification of female bodies as a basis for the nation state – "Khol Do" and "Lajwanti" exemplify these impulses. "Subah-e Azadi", on the other hand, demonstrates how even in moments of extreme representational rupture, as in Faiz's choice of the *nazm* instead of the *ghazal*, Urdu modernist writers still drew from literary tradition, repositioning it as resource and vocabulary to critique the postcolonial nation state.

Gyanendra Pandey (1992) reminds us of the importance of reinscribing histories of violence back into the political mainstream in South Asia, noting that "part of the importance of the 'fragmentary' point of view lies in that it resists the drive for a shallow homogenization and struggles for other, potentially richer definitions of the 'nation' and the future political community" (28–29). The progressive texts discussed here take this project onto the level of form. They trouble concepts of the nation by pointing subtly to the modernizing regimes it relies on, as in Manto's critique of modernity, signified by clock time in "Khol Do". In "Subah-e Azadi", Faiz transforms the literary aesthetics of the classical *ghazal* to probe Partition as paradox, melding together two literary forms (the *ghazal* and the *nazm*) not to produce unity but rather to suggest the disunity epitomized by Partition. And finally, Bedi's "Lajwanti" explores Partition as image, drawing on the resources of antiquity to fragment the link between women's bodies and national identity. These three texts on Partition disentangle realism from representation through modernist strategies. The progressive writers discussed

here not only developed Urdu literary modernism to critique the particular nation states of India and Pakistan. They also fashioned literature into a vehicle for promoting secular humanism to shape Urdu literature in the decades surrounding independence into a means of dissent and protest.

Notes

1. Manto wrote “Khol Do” in a matter of hours, and reportedly was finishing the story when Qasmi arrived at his house. According to Qasmi, Manto took extra care in composing the last lines of the story, and Qasmi trembled as he read them. The story led *Nuqush* to be banned by the Pakistani government for six months (Jalal 2013, 153).
2. The first sentence is taken from the Muhammad Umar Memon translation (Manto 2015); the second and third sentences are my own translation, with significant words from the original Urdu given in brackets.
3. As indicated, the translation cited here is by Memon (Manto 2015), to which I have added in brackets significant words from the Urdu original, since they are discussed in what follows.
4. As in Manto ([1948] 2017); the English translation (Manto 2015) contains more than 17 paragraphs.
5. The volume was produced to show the unity of Indian literature in the subcontinent’s many vernaculars. Many of the stories were translated by the authors themselves.

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