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# Life and Words

VIOLENCE AND THE  
DESCENT INTO THE ORDINARY

Foreword by Stanley Cavell





## Language and Body

### *Transactions in the Construction of Pain*

IN AN EARLIER VERSION OF THIS CHAPTER, I wrote, "In repeatedly trying to write the meaning(s) of violence against women in Indian society, I find that languages of pain through which social sciences could gaze at, touch or become textual bodies on which this pain is written often elude me."<sup>1</sup> I felt compelled then to look toward the transactions between language and body in the work of mourning, and especially in the gendered division of labor by which the antiphony of language and silence re-creates the world in the face of tragic loss. In the previous chapter, I tried to give an account of how it is that the imagining of the project of nationalism in India came to include the appropriation of bodies of women as objects on which the desire for nationalism could be brutally inscribed and a memory for the future made. As I tried to argue, the imagination of a social contract that would inaugurate the nation-state saw men as heads of households—husbands and fathers—who became authorized to initiate the advent of the nation-state only after they had shown themselves capable of offering protection to women defined as "their own women" from men of the enemy community, who themselves agreed to forego violence against the women of the other community. Despite the frequent references to the suffering of women, however, what the Constituent Assembly debates showed was the substitution of authoritarian forms of speaking in the absence of any standing languages through which the pain could be addressed.

One might recall Foucault here: "Nothing is more inconsistent than a political regime that is indifferent to the truth: but nothing is more dangerous than a political system that claims to prescribe the truth."<sup>2</sup>

#### WRITING PAIN

If I cannot claim to know the pain of the other, unlike the social workers who *knew* what women who were abducted *wanted*—what is it to relate to such pain? The absence of any standing languages of pain is perhaps symptomatic of the fact that I cannot separate my pain from my expression for it—another way of saying this is that my expression of pain compels you

¶ in unique ways—you are not free to believe or disbelieve me—our future ¶ is at stake. I want to reenter this scene of devastation to ask how one might inhabit such a world, one which has been made strange through the desolating experience of violence and loss. Cavell describes this as the Emersonian gesture of approaching the world through a kind of mourning for it.<sup>3</sup>

¶ Some realities need to be fictionalized before they can be apprehended. ¶ I shall allow myself three scenes of writing as opening paths for understanding how one might allow such pain to happen to oneself and interperse this move with thoughts on violence and pain. In these three scenes I call upon the words of the philosopher Wittgenstein, the poet-novelist-essayist Rabindranath Tagore, and the short story writer Sa'adat Hasan Manto as persons who responded to the call of the world in the register of the imaginary. Tagore and Manto are important to me, for they responded in sounds and senses of the Indian languages to the scenes of devastation; Wittgenstein, because he showed the possibilities of the imagination of pain within a rigorous philosophical grammar. In placing their texts within mine, I hope I shall be evoking the physiognomy of their words not in the manner of a thief who has stolen another's voice, but in the manner of one who pawns herself to the words of the other.

#### SCENE ONE

The first scene is from Wittgenstein's *Blue and Brown Books* on the question of how my pain may reside in another body:

In order to see that it is conceivable that one person should have pain in another person's body, one must examine what sorts of facts we call criteria for a pain being in a certain place. . . . Suppose I feel a pain



which on the evidence of the pain alone, e.g. with closed eyes, I should call a pain in my left hand. Someone asks me to touch the painful spot with my right hand. I do so and looking around perceive that I am touching my neighbor's hand. . . . This would be pain *felt* in another's body.<sup>4</sup>

\* In this movement between bodies, the sentence "I am in pain" becomes the conduit through which I may move out of the inexpressible privacy and suffocation of my pain. This does not mean that I am understood. Wittgenstein uses the route of a philosophical grammar to say that this is not an indicative statement, although it may have the formal appearance of one. It is the beginning of a language game. Pain in this rendering is not that inexpressible something that destroys communication or marks an exit from one's existence in language. Instead, it makes a claim on the other—asking for acknowledgment that may be given or denied. In either case, it is not a referential statement that is pointing to an inner object.

What is fascinating for me is that in drawing the scene of the pathos of pain, Wittgenstein creates language as the bodying forth of words. Where is my pain? In touching you to point out the location of that pain, has my pointing finger—there it is—found your body, which my pain (our pain) can inhabit, at least for that moment when I close my eyes and touch your hand? And if the language for the inexpressibility of pain is always falling short of my need for its plenitude, then is this not the sense of disappointment that human beings have with themselves and the language that is given to them? But also, does the whole task of becoming human, even of becoming perversely human, not involve a response (even if this is rage) to the sense of loss when language seems to fail? Wittgenstein's example of my pain inhabiting your body seems to me to suggest either the intuition that the representation of shared pain exists in the imagination but cannot be translated into concrete ways that could be put into the world—in which case, one would say that language is hooked rather inadequately to the world of pain—or, alternately, that the experience of pain cries out for this response of the possibility that my pain could reside in your body and that the philosophical grammar of pain is an answer to that call.

\* If I might be allowed, I would like to draw out the meaning of my repeated (and even compulsive) reliance on Wittgenstein by braiding my words with those of Cavell. In generously agreeing to augment my reflections on pain, Cavell offered what to me was a philosophical friendship in which he was able to hear what I was stuttering to say. I quote:

This seems to me a place Veena Das finds company in work of mine, especially that on Wittgenstein. So, I will testify to my conviction in two moments in which she finds her ground: first, in her appeal to her own experience (e.g., "In my own experience the question of how good death and bad death is to be defined by the act of witnessing is a more complicated one"), an appeal in her writing that I unfailingly place confidence in and am grateful for; second, in her use of Wittgenstein's example of "feeling pain in the body of another," a passage that no one, to my knowledge, has put to more creative, nor sounder, use. I take Wittgenstein's fantasy in that passage as a working out of Descartes's sense that my soul and my body, while necessarily distinct, are not merely contingently connected. I am necessarily the owner of my pain, yet the fact that it is always located in my body is not necessary. This is what Wittgenstein wishes to show—that it is conceivable that I locate it in another's body. That this does not in fact, or literally, happen in our lives means that the fact of our separateness is something that I have to conceive, a task of imagination—that to know your pain I cannot locate it as I locate mine, but I must let it happen to me. My knowledge of you marks me; it is something that I experience, yet I am not present to it. . . . My knowledge of myself is something I find, as on a successful quest; my knowledge of others, of their separateness from me, is something that finds me. . . . And it seems reasonable to me, and illuminating, to speak of that reception of impression as my lending my body to the other's experience. The plainest manifestation of this responsiveness may be taken to be its effect on a body of writing.<sup>5</sup>

## SCENE TWO

The second scene I call forth is from Rabindranath Tagore. The investment of sexuality into the project of nationalism is prefigured in three of his novels—*Gora*, *Ghore Baire*, and *Char Adhyaya*. Here I want simply to draw out certain passages from *Ghore Baire* (*Home and the World*)—a novel that is set in the context of the *swadeshi* movement against the British Raj.<sup>6</sup>

The nature of a spiritual struggle for Tagore seems to announce itself as a struggle to make the self that has become frozen in language mobile and free again. It is this frozen self that reads itself as if it were a script dramatized in the character of Sandip. It produces a magnification of the images of both nation and sexuality, and in Tagore's reading, it is the pursuit of such magnified images that can make one blind toward the concreteness of human beings, their being flesh and blood creatures, and thus to their suffering.



The story of *Ghare Baire* is well known. The narrative device is to relate the story through interspersed accounts of the three main characters, Nikhil, the local *zamindar* who is bound to his *praja* (subjects who include both Hindus and Muslims) by ties of patronage and love; his wife Bimala, whose desire moves from Nikhil to Sandip and then returns to Nikhil; and his friend Sandip, the fiery nationalist revolutionary. I reproduce only some root metaphors from each character.<sup>7</sup>

### Bimala

When inspired by Sandip's passionate speech in favor of the *swadeshi* movement, which she has heard in the company of other women from behind the curtains, Bimala tells her husband that she wishes to serve a meal to Sandip with her own hands. Serving food by a woman to a man is a sensuous gesture, hovering between the maternal and the sexual in Bengali imagery. This is the first time Bimala will enter any male presence except that of her husband, for, according to convention, women of the feudal household do not step outside the women's domestic space.

Listen here to Bimala's self-reflection: "I shall speak the truth. That day I felt—why has not god made me unbelievably beautiful. . . . Today as this great day dawns, let the men of the nation see in its women—the form of the goddess Jagaddhatri [the goddess who holds the earth]. . . . Will Sandip be able to see that awakened power of the country in me? Or will he think that I am an ordinary woman, merely the wife who lives in his friend's house?"

### Sandip

The magnification of her image in Sandip's eyes that Bimala desires finds an answering chord. But before I describe that, how does Sandip construct himself? Listen to the opening line, when the reader first hears the voice of Sandip: "When I read my own account, I reflect, is that Sandip? Am I simply constructed in language? Am I just a book constructed of flesh and blood?" And then Sandip responds to the desire for the magnification of the image of Bimala that would merge with the image of the nation—a desire, however, that is read as need:

Unless they can behold the nation with their own eyes, our people will not awaken. The nation needs the icon of a goddess. . . . It will not do if *we* construct the icon. It is the icons that have been transmitted by tradition that will have to be transformed into the icons of our nation. The path of

worship is deeply transcribed in our country—traversing that path we shall have to direct the devotional stream toward the nation.

When I saw Bimala, I said *that* god(dess) for whose worship I have come to the earth after a hundred thousand *yuga* (ages), till (s)he revealed her form to me, till then could I have believed in her with all my body and soul? If I had not been able to behold you, then I could not have seen the whole country as one, this I have told you many times. I do not know if you understand this. It is very difficult to explain that the gods in their heaven remain invisible, only in the world of death do they show themselves.

And then we see this desire as reported speech in Bimala's story:

Sandip then got up and said, Man reaches such a state when the whole world comes to be concentrated in one small place.<sup>8</sup> Here in your salon I have seen my world revealed. . . . I worship you. . . . After seeing you my *mantra* [sacred formula] has changed. Not *vande matram* [I worship the nation as mother] but *vande priyam* [I worship the nation as beloved], *vande mohinim* [I worship the nation as the enticing one]. The mother protects us . . . the beloved destroys us. Beautiful is that destruction. You hear the tinkling of the bells of that dance of death. This delicate, luminous, fruit bearing, the one cooled by the Malay mountains<sup>9</sup>—this earth of Bengal—you have altered its image in the eyes of your devotee in the fraction of a second [literally, in the blinking of an eye]. You, oh, Mohini [the enticing one, a female form that the god Vishnu took to entice the demons to drink poison]—you have come with your vessel of poison—I shall either die after drinking this poison or shall become the one who has conquered death.

### Nikhil

In an argument with Sandip, Nikhil says: "I am willing to serve my country but not to worship it. To offer worship to anyone else except that which should be worshipped is to destroy it." In an argument with Sandip on the nation as icon (as reported speech in Sandip's voice) we hear:

But all this is very difficult to explain to Nikhil. Truth is now like a prejudice in his mind. As if there is a special substance called truth. I have said to him often that where falsity is truth, there falsehood *alone* is truth. That falsehood shall be superior to truth. Those who can think of the icon of the nation as a truth, that icon will do the work of truth. We as a people cannot visualize the idea of a nation with ease, but we can see the icon as



the nation easily. . . . Those who want to accomplish the project of nationalism will have to work with this understanding.

Nikhil suddenly got very agitated and said, You have lost the power to serve the truth, therefore you want a sacred formula to drop from the skies. This is why when for hundreds of years the work of the nation has remained undone, you now want to make the nation into a god so that you can stretch your palms in supplication and receive a blessing as if by magic.

And finally Nikhil accepts his defeat, in that his wife and beloved Bimala saw him as a diminished human being in comparison to Sandip, but refuses to accept this as the extinguishing of the self:

Today I shall have to see myself and Bimal<sup>10</sup> completely from the outside. I am greedy. I wanted to enjoy that Tillottama [a mythic woman created by the gods so that every particle of her being was perfect] as my mental creation. The Bimal who had an external existence had become a pretext for that. But Bimal is what she is—she does not have to become Tillottama for me—there is no reason for that.

Today I have understood this clearly—I am just a contingency in Bimal's life. That person with whom Bimal's whole being can merge, that person is Sandip. But it would be a great lie if I were to say that it means I am nothing, for my manhood was not simply a means to capture the women of the interior.

### *An Interlude*

Let us bring together the movements that run through these three voices for a tentative weaving together at this moment. Each of the two men has found his destruction in Bimala, but in different ways. Sandip began his account by voicing the idea that he was just a script—someone who had no existence outside of language. In the only moment of authenticity that is permitted to him, which comes when Bimala has turned away from him, she responds to a passionate plea by saying, "Sandip Babu, have you got several speeches written in your exercise book—so can you produce an appropriate one for each occasion?" Sandip's own fear is finally confirmed in the reflection in Bimala's speech—he exists only in language as if signifying a will to emptiness. His words do not *falsify* an inner life or draw a veil over it—they are indeed functioning to hide the fact that there *is* no inner life to hide. His search for the nation is a search for an icon, his desire for the other is for a magnification of image in which the lack of individual self may be hidden by a collectivization of desire. I would have been tempted to

draw an analogy with the idea of certain kinds of ghosts in folklore whose identity is revealed in a mirror by the fact that they cast no reflection. Rabindranath himself, who appears in the voice of a schoolmaster, compares him to the new moon (*amavasyar chand*)—simply an absence.

As distinctions dissolve and the nation becomes a magnified image of the beloved worshipped in the abstract, it becomes possible to inflict all kinds of violence on all those who resist this or who create counter-images, equally enlarged. The desire for icons allows the nation as an absent object to be made magically visible through an investment in this magnified sexuality. The potential for violence is written in this construction. The story ends with a communal carnage that the reader does not gaze at directly but that is happening outside the immediate frame, waiting as it were, as the double of the nationalist ideology that has been propounded.

Nikhil may seem to have won since Bimala returns to him. But in their last exchange of intimacies, Bimala falls on his feet and begs him to let her worship him. Is this traditional slippage between husband and god not what he has tried to resist in their relationship all along? He does not try to stop her from this disastrous identification anymore: "Who am I to stop her—after all it is not I who am the recipient of this worship." Nikhil's defeat is the realization that the everyday life embodied in tradition lives as much in the worship of icons (the husband as god) as the new transformations that Sandip is trying to bring (nation as god). We see Nikhil riding away from us into the heart of the carnage, offering himself as either a sacrificial victim or a martyr (but never being named as such)—the very magnification of the image of nation and the investment of sexual desire in it has made it into a monster. We know only that, as the voice of the schoolteacher tells us, it won't do for him not to go there, for what is being done to the women is unspeakable. Toward the end he is brought back, injured, in a carriage. The news, says the person who has rescued him, is not good. We do not know if he will live or die.

Tagore does not permit himself a closure. Nikhil is the truth seeker who can find comfort neither in the psychological clichés of tradition (husband is god) nor in those of modernity (nation is god). He sees the potential of violence in both. Tradition is what diminishes women and permits a subtle everyday violence to be perpetrated upon them. Thus when Bimala once comments that women's hearts are ungenerous, small, Nikhil replies, "Yes, like the feet of Chinese women that are tied and never allowed to grow." In the modern project of building a nation, the image is not diminished, but enlarged. Its dramatization means that bodies of women are violently



appropriated for the cause as nationalism gives birth to its double—communalism. If one deified women so that the nation could be imagined as the beloved, the other makes visible the dark side of this project by making the bodies of women the surfaces on which their text of the nation is written.<sup>11</sup>

Body and language both function as simulacra in which collective desire and collective death meet. Nikhil, the truth seeker, prefigures the image of the martyr who must offer himself in an unheroic mode so that the magnified images of gods and demons have a chance to be humanized again. I think this is the task Tagore sets his reader—to hear the unfinished nature of this story of the transformations of the projects of tradition and modernity.

### SCENE THREE

The third scene I want to evoke is from a story entitled *Khol Do* by Sa'adat Hasan Manto, which I first analyzed in 1986.<sup>12</sup> The setting is the Partition of India and the communal carnage, though we never gaze at the violence directly. An aged father and his daughter take a journey from one side of the border to another. On reaching his destination, the father cannot find the daughter. He goes berserk searching for her. He comes across some young men who are acting as volunteers to help trace lost relatives of refugees who are pouring in. He tells them about his daughter and urges them to find her. They promise to help.

The young men find Sakina, the daughter, hiding in a forest, half crazed with fear. They reassure her by evoking the name of her father and how he had asked them to find her and bring her safely back to him. She climbs into the jeep with them (because we assume that she is assured of their good intentions). One of them, seeing how embarrassed she is because she does not have her *dupatta*, gives her his jacket so that she can cover her breasts.

We next see a clinic. A near-dead body is being brought in on a stretcher. The father, Sarajjudin, recognizes the corpse. It is his daughter. Numbly he follows the stretcher to the doctor's office. Reacting to the heat and suffocation in the room, the doctor points to the window and says, "*khol do*—open it." There is a movement in the dead body. The hands move toward the tape of the *salwar* (trouser) and fumble to unloosen (literally, open) it. Old Sarajjudin shouts in joy "My daughter is alive—my daughter is alive." The doctor is drenched in sweat.

As I understood this story in 1986, I saw Sakina condemned to a living death. The normality of language has been destroyed as Sakina can hear words conveying only the "other" command. Such a fractured relation to

language has been documented for many survivors of prolonged violence, for whom it is the ordinariness of language that divides them from the rest of the world. I noted that even Sakina's father cannot comprehend the nonworld into which she has been plunged, for he mistakes the movement in the body as a sign of life whereas in truth it is the sign of her living death. Only the doctor—as the off-the-center character in the story—can register the true horror, I said.

Upon deeper meditation on this story, I think there is one last movement that I did not then comprehend. In giving a shout of joy and saying "My daughter is alive," the father does not speak to give voice to a scripted tradition. In the societal context of this period, when ideas of purity and honor densely populated the literary narratives as well as family and political narratives, so that fathers willed their daughters to die for family honor rather than live with bodies that had been violated by other men, *this father wills his daughter to live even as parts of her body can do nothing else but proclaim her brutal violation*.

In the terms set by the example from the *Blue and Brown Books*, one may ask if the pain of the female body so violated can live in a male body. One can read in Manto a transaction between death and life, body and speech, in the figures of the daughter and the father. In the speech of the father, at least, the daughter is alive, and though she may find an existence only in his utterance, he creates through his utterance a home for her mutilated and violated self. Compare this with hundreds of stories in accounts purporting to be based on direct experience in which the archetypical motif is of a girl finding her way to her parents after having been subjected to rape and plunder and being told, "Why are you here—it would have been better if you were dead." As I have argued elsewhere, such rejections may not have occurred as often as they were alleged to have happened in narratives. But the widespread circulation of such narratives and their truths, the normativity attributed to the idea of sacrificing the daughter or the wife to maintain the unsullied purity and honor of the family—these proved the power of stories. To be masculine when death was all around was to be able to hand death to your violated daughter without flinching one bit—to obliterate any desire for the concreteness of this human being who once played in your family's yard.<sup>13</sup> In the background of such stories, a single sentence of joy uttered by old Sarajjudin transforms the meaning of being a father.<sup>14</sup>

In Tagore's reading of Sandip, he was capable of constituting himself as subject only as a linguistic cliché. In Manto, the sentence "My daughter is



alive" is like Wittgenstein's "I am in pain." Although it has the formal appearance of an indicative statement, it is to beseech the daughter to find a way to live in the speech of the father. And it happens not at the moment when her dishonor is hidden from the eyes of the world but at the moment when her body proclaims it. This sentence is the beginning of a relationship and not its end.

At this moment I want to present a glimpse of a later argument. I have written elsewhere that in the gendered division of labor in the work of mourning, it is the task of men to ritually create a body for the dead person and to find a place in the cosmos for the dead. This task, which is always a very difficult one for the mourner, may even become repulsive, as when members of the Aghori sect who live on cremation grounds state that in the cases when someone has died an unnatural or violent death, they have to consume parts of the dead body so as to free the dead person from living the fate of a homeless ghost.<sup>15</sup> I wonder if Sarajjudin performed this terrifying task of accepting the tortured relationship with the daughter whom other fathers may have simply cast away as socially dead. And whether instead of the simplified images of healing, which assume reliving a trauma or decatharting desire from the lost object and reinvesting it elsewhere, we need to think of healing as a kind of relationship with death.

#### INHABITING THE WORLD IN MOURNING

Nadia Seremataki has put forward the powerful idea of the ethics of antiphony to describe the structure of Greek mourning rituals. She shows how the interaction between acoustic, linguistic, and corporeal orientations serves to give a public definition to a "good death" and to distinguish it from a "bad death." "The acoustics of death embodied in "screaming" and lamenting and the presence or "appearance" (*fanerosi*) of kin construct the "good death." The silent death is the asocial "bad death" without kin support: "Silence here connotes the absence of witness."<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is the special role of women to "witness" death and to convert silence into speech.<sup>17</sup> In the rendering of this issue Seremataki seems to slip into the assumption that what is at stake is physical death.

What happens to the work of mourning when women have been abducted, raped, and condemned to a social death? The classical ritualistic solution in this case is for the social body to cut itself completely off from the polluted individual. This symbolic death is objectified and made present by the performance of symbolic mourning for the "dead" person, by

such ritualistic devices as the breaking of a pot that comes to stand for the person who is socially dead but is physically alive. This is the sentiment underlying the stories I described earlier of kinsmen refusing to accept women who had been abducted or violated, or of men construing their kinship obligations in terms of the obligation to kill a beloved sister or wife rather than let her fall into the hands of men of the other community. Such women who were violated and rejected may be said to be occupying a zone between two deaths, rather than between life and death. Let us take a step backward toward mourning in everyday life as it occurs in the case of "normal" deaths and ask if it was possible to deploy cultural codes to represent the kind of social death I have described. It does not seem an easy matter to transform these "bad deaths" into "good deaths."

In an earlier paper I described the division of labor between women and men, between professional mourners and close relatives, and between kin and affine in giving structure to the work of mourning in Punjabi families.<sup>18</sup> It is through the ritual work performed by the professional mourners (usually women of the barber caste who have specialized roles in the death rituals) that grief was objectified in the form of a portrait. We can glean from descriptions of death rituals given in several accounts that women would form a circle around the dead body and move in circular forms, all the time beating their breasts and inflicting injuries upon their own bodies. In the frenzy of this "grief" they would tear at their clothes and their hair, improvising various mourning laments to make the loss that has occurred public and utterable. They gave a lead to the mourning laments of the other women who were closely related to the dead person. The laments articulated what the loss meant for each person, now bereaved. The address was to the dead person, to the living, to their own bodies as well as to the gods. I give a brief example of each kind of address from my own ethnography:

(To the dead son)—Open your eyes just once my beloved jewel (*mere lal*)—you have never turned back any request I made of you.

(To the men who are going to take the dead body of her husband to the cremation ground)—Do not let the fire touch him—I fold my hands before you—he could never bear the heat.

(To one's own body)—Are you made of stone that you do not break when you see this calamity?

(To the family goddess, referring to the fact that the goddess is a virgin; address is by the mother of a dead son)—You call yourself a goddess—you were just jealous of the good fortune of my *bahu* (son's wife)—you had to



make her a widow because you have yourself never found a husband—you call yourself a goddess—you are a demoness.

I could give extensive examples of statements that are close to blasphemy in the laments, on how women rage against the idea that gods are *just* beings, rather than callous, small-minded beings who play with the happiness of mortals. They rage against their bodies, which have to bear pain within, rather than disintegrate in the face of such tragedy. But since the mourning laments also have a dialogical element, soon other women begin to punctuate this by the counsel to get on with the work of living and by assurances to the most deeply affected mourners that the support of the community is with them. It is not that grief is seen as something that shall pass with time. Rather, the representation of grief is that it is metonymically experienced as bodily pain and that the female body will carry this pain forever within itself. A mimesis is established between body and language, but it is through the work of the collectivity that this happens rather than at the level of individual symptom. A mourning lament from rural Greece recorded by Loring Danforth<sup>19</sup> bears the same grammar as the mourning laments in Punjabi families:

My child, where can I put the *ponos* I feel for you?  
If I toss it by the roadside, those who pass will take it.  
If I throw it in a tree, the little birds will take it.  
I will take it in my heart so that it will take root there  
So that it will cause me *ponos* while I walk.  
So that it will kill me as I stand.

So, in a sense, it is the objectification of grief on the body taken as surface and as depth, as well as in language, that bears witness to the loss that death has inflicted. According to Seremetakis, it is this witnessing that can make the performance of death public and even convert a bad death into a good death. In my own experience the question of how good death and bad death are to be defined by the act of witnessing is a more complicated one, and I shall return to it a little later.

The excess of speech in the mourning laments and the theatrical infliction of harm on the body enacted by women stand in stark contrast to the behavior of men. While in the course of everyday life, men dominate the public domain in terms of the control over speech, in the case of death they become mute, as it were. While the corpse is in the house, all the

preparations, including the bathing and dressing of the dead body, are performed by the women. Women cling to the dead body imploring the dead person not to leave them. It is the men who have to disengage the dead body from the weeping and wailing women, to carry it on their shoulders to the cremation *ghats* and to give the sacred fire to the dead person. It is they who gather the bones on the fourth day and perform the ritual of immersing these into the sacred river. For a period ranging from ten to thirteen days the dead person hovers between the living and the dead in the form of a ghost, and it is through the gift of a body ritually created for him or her by the chief mourner (usually the husband or the son) that the ghost finally becomes an ancestor. Thus if women perform the task of bearing witness to the grief and the loss that death has inflicted (otherwise people will say was it a dog or cat that died, one woman told me), it is men who must ritually create all the conditions so that the dead too can find a home.

But if the good death is defined by the bearing of witness on the part of women so that grief can move between the body and speech can be publicly articulated, as well as the performance of rituals for the dead so that they do not have to wander in the world of the living as a ghost, how is bad death to be represented? Seremetakis formulates this by saying that it is death that is unwitnessed and kinless that is bad and gives some very moving examples of how women's speech might convert such a bad death into a good death. In my own experience, the relation between women's speech and their silence is a very complicated relation. It involves the question of the agency of a bad death. In a sense every death except that of a very old person introduces disorder in personal and social life. But in the flow of everyday life this is understood as caused by events beyond the control of the living community. Indeed, one of the underlying tensions of mourning rituals is to absolve the living from taking responsibility for the death that has occurred. If a woman has died in her husband's home, efforts will be made immediately to get her natal kin before the body is taken for cremation so that her kin can mourn her properly but also to ensure that they do not suspect the affines of neglect or worse. In the case of a man who has died, the piety of the widow would be attested in the mourning laments so that she does not blame herself for the death of her husband. A common refrain in mourning laments is to say that the ostensible cause of the death (for instance, a particular disease) is only the pretext for death to do its appointed job. Of course, when death is seen as caused by the willful action of others, then a great tension prevails as to



what definition of the situation will come to prevail through the control of mourning laments.<sup>20</sup>

All this is reversed when the normal flow of life is seen as disrupted by the violence of men. In that case women bear witness to this disorder by a new construction of speech and silence. A woman recalled to me a mourning lament that witnessed the defeat of the Sikhs at the hands of the British troops in the Anglo-Sikh wars:

The crowns on the heads of the young wives—  
The flowing laps of the mothers—  
The swagger of sisters protected by brothers—  
Wiped out in a moment—  
Oh, from seven seas across came the white man to fight.

She went on to say that although everything was wiped out, it was possible for the women to wail since their men had died heroically in war. The men had died as husbands, sons, and brothers. But in the case of all who died in the Partition, there was nothing but silence—for the men who inflicted such violence on women were not only strange men but also men known and deeply loved.<sup>21</sup> It is to an elaboration of this statement that the next section is devoted. It is an amplification that I have constructed—for it was never possible for me to get an exegesis of such statements from the women themselves.

#### AN AMPLIFICATION

In the literary imagination the violence of the Partition was about inscribing desire on the bodies of women in a manner that we have not yet understood. In the mythic imagination in India, victory or defeat in war was ultimately inscribed on the bodies of women. The texts on the *vilap*—mourning laments of Gandhari in the Mahabharata or of Mandodari in the Ramayana, whose kin were all slain in the epic battles—are literary classics.<sup>22</sup> This is a metaphoric transformation of the role of witnessing death in everyday life.

The violence of the Partition was unique in the metamorphosis it achieved between the idea of appropriating a territory as nation and appropriating the body of the women as territory. As we saw earlier, a prefiguration of this is found in Tagore's rendering of the idea of the magnification of the image of nation, which draws its energy from the image of magnified sexuality.

However, this image of sexuality and its intimate connection with the project of nationalism not only has a genealogy in the Indian imagination, but it was also an important narrative trope in the representation of the violation of the project of empire. The image of the innocent white woman who was brutally raped by the barbaric sepoy was an important narrative trope for establishing the barbaric character of the natives in 1857, when the first large-scale rebellion against the British took place. Jenny Sharpe has analyzed the image of helpless women and children being cut to pieces by leering sepoys as establishing the "truth" of the "mutiny." As she says, "Commissioners and magistrates entrusted with investigating the rumors could find no evidence of systematic rape, mutilation and torture at Cawnpore or anyplace else. The official reports, however, came too late, as the sensational stories had already done their work. Rebels were seen as sadistic fiends, and Nana Sahib was especially vilified for the unforgivable crime of desecrating English womanhood. Barr exhibits a predictable understanding of the Cawnpore massacre when she writes that there 'one of the most revered of Victorian institutions, the English lady was slaughtered, defiled and brought low.' When the massacre of women is reported as the destruction of an institution, we know that the sacred image of English womanhood has outlived the story of women's lives."<sup>23</sup>

Thus we have the interweaving of two strands. First, the idea that women must bear witness to death, which is found in the classical Indian literature and in everyday life, gets transformed into the notion that the woman's body must be made to bear the signs of its possession by the enemy. The second strand seems to come from a narrative trope established at the time of the mutiny that equates the violation of the nation with the violation of its women. It is not very clear whether during the riots nationalist slogans were actually imprinted upon the private parts of women, although the most horrific stories about such violations are commonly believed.<sup>24</sup> The figures given in the Legislative Assembly during the Constituent Assembly debates in 1949 confirm that a large number of women were abducted and raped. It is also affirmed that processions of women who were stripped naked were organized to the accompaniment of jeering crowds in cities like Amritsar and Lahore. Family narratives abound telling of men who were compelled to kill their women to save their honor though they often lack specificity. Such sacrificial deaths are beatified in family narratives, while women who were recovered from their abductors and returned to their families or who converted to the other religion and made new lives in the



homes of their abductors hardly ever find a place in these narratives, although they occur frequently in the literary representations.

When women's bodies were made the passive witnesses of the disorder of the Partition in this manner, how did women mourn the loss of self and the world? It is in considering this question that we find startling reversals in the transactions between body and language. In the normal process of mourning, grievous harm is inflicted by women on their own bodies while the acoustic and linguistic codes make the loss public by the mourning laments. When asking women to narrate their experiences of the Partition, I found a zone of silence around the event. This silence was achieved either by the use of language that was general and metaphoric but that evaded description of any events with specificity so as to capture the particularity of their experience, or by describing the surrounding events but leaving the actual experience of abduction and rape unstated. It was common to describe the violence of the Partition in such terms as rivers of blood flowing and the earth covered with white shrouds right unto the horizon. Sometimes a woman would remember images of fleeing, but as one woman warned me, it was dangerous to remember. These memories were sometimes compared to poison that makes the inside of the woman dissolve as a solid is dissolved in a powerful liquid (*andar hi andar ghul ja rahi hai*). At other times a woman would say that she was like a discarded exercise book in which the accounts of past relationships were kept. At any rate, none of the metaphors used to describe the self that had become the repository of poisonous knowledge emphasized the need to give expression to this hidden knowledge. Or rather, containing it was itself the expression of it.

This code of silence protected women who had been brought back to their families through the efforts of the military evacuation authorities after they were recovered from the homes of their abductors or who had been married, by stretching norms of kinship and affinity since the violation of their bodies was never made public. Rather than bearing witness to the disorder that they had been subjected to, the metaphor that they used was of a woman drinking the poison and keeping it within her: "Just as a woman's body is made so that she can hide the faults of her husband deep within her, so she can drink all pain—take the stance of silence." And as one woman told Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, "What is a woman? She is always used,"<sup>25</sup> or to me, "What is there to be proud of in a woman's body—everyday it is polluted by being consumed." The sliding of the representations of the female body from everyday life into the body that had

become the container of the poisonous knowledge of the events of the Partition perhaps helped women to assimilate their experiences into their everyday life.

Just as the relation between speech and silence is reversed in the act of witnessing here, so is the relation between the surface and depth of the body. In the fantasy of men, the inscription of nationalist slogans on the bodies of women (Victory to India, Long Live Pakistan), or proclaiming possession of their bodies (This thing, this loot—*ye mal*—is ours), would create a future memory by which men of the other community would never be able to forget that the women as territory had already been claimed and occupied by other men. The bodies of the women were surfaces on which texts were to be written and read—icons of the new nations. But women converted this passivity into agency by using metaphors of pregnancy—hiding pain, giving it a home just as a child is given a home in the woman's body. Julia Kristeva's description of pregnancy—it happens but I am not there—may also be used to describe such violence.<sup>26</sup> But the subsequent act of remembering only through the body makes the woman's own experience displace being from the surface to the depth of the body. The only difference is that unlike the child, which the woman will be able to offer to the husband, this holding of the pain inside must never be allowed to be born. This movement from surface to depth also transforms passivity into agency.

It was once again Sa'adat Hasan Manto who was able to give literary expression to the body as a receptacle of poisonous knowledge. In his story *Fundanen*<sup>27</sup> (Tassels), a woman is sitting in front of a mirror. Her speech is completely incoherent, but like many strings of nonsense used in rhymes or musical compositions, its phonetic properties are like theatrical or musical representations. Interspersed between the strings of nonsense syllables are meaningful sentences with precise information such as the bus number that brought her from one side of the border to another. The woman is drawing grotesque designs on her body, registering these only in the mirror. She says she is designing a body that is appropriate for the time: in those days, she says, women had to grow two stomachs—one was the normal one, and the second was for them to be able to bear the fruits of violence within themselves. The distortion of speech and the distortion of body seem to make deep sense. The language of pain could only be a kind of hysteria—the surface of the body becomes a carnival of images, and the depth becomes the site for hysterical pregnancies—the language having all the phonetic excess of hysteria that destroys apparent meanings.



When Tagore's Bimala said that she wondered if Sandip could see the power of the nation in her, she seems to have prefigured Manto's women in whom one could see the completion of that project of making the nation visible by a surrealist juxtaposition of images.

So if men emerged from colonial subjugation as autonomous citizens of an independent nation, then they emerged simultaneously as monsters. What kind of death rituals could have been performed for these wandering ghosts to be given a place in the cosmos? Intizar Hussain described this in his story "The City of Sorrow," in which three nameless men are having a conversation. The story opens with the first man saying, "I have nothing to say. I am dead." The story then moves in the form of a dialogue on the manner of his dying. Did he die when he forced a man at the point of his sword to strip his sister naked? No, he remained alive. Then perhaps when he saw the same man forcing another old man to strip his wife naked? No, he remained alive. Then when he was himself forced to strip his own sister naked? Then too he remained alive. It was when his father gazed at his face and died that he heard in his wife's voice the question, "Don't you know it is you who are dead?" and he realized he had died. But he was condemned to carry his own corpse with him wherever he went.

It appears to me that just as women drank the pain so that life could continue, so men longed for martyrdom by which they could invite the evil back upon themselves and humanize the enormous looming images of nation and sexuality. But it was not the political discourse that achieved this. The debates in the Constituent Assembly on the issue of abducted women were full of the imagery of restoring national honor by recovering the women who had been abducted from the other side and returning "their" women back to the Muslims. Mahatma Gandhi, writing about the exchange of women and of prisoners on the same page of his Delhi diary, said that it had pained him to learn that many Hindu men were reluctant to return the Muslim women. He urged them to do so as a form of repentance. Nehru urged Hindu men to accept the women who were recovered and to not punish them for the sins of their abductors. In this entire discourse of exchange of women from both sides, it was assumed that once the nation had reclaimed its women, its honor would have been restored. It was as if you could wipe the slate clean and leave the horrendous events behind.

It was on the register of the imaginary that the question of what would constitute the passion of those who occupied this unspeakable and unheard zone was given shape. The zone between two deaths that the women had to occupy did not permit of any speech, for what "right" words could

have been spoken against the wrong that had been done them? Hence Manto's Sakina can proclaim the terrible truth of this society by a mute repetition of a *gesture*—*murde mein kuch jumbish hui* (there was movement in the corpse). The task for men was to hear this silence and to see the gesture, to mold these into something else by their presence. Hence the joyful cry by the father that his daughter was alive. This being alive in the zone of two deaths and witnessing the truth of the woman's violation is how mourning in this zone could be defined. Hence the issue is not that of an Antigone, mourning for her dead brother in defiance of the law of Creon, proclaiming that the register of someone who has been named must be preserved, as Lacan makes us witness it in his interpretation of Antigone's famous passage that she would not have died for a husband or a child but that this concerned her brother, born of the same father and the same mother (the product of criminal desire and criminal knowledge).<sup>28</sup> Here it is the issue of the women drinking poisonous knowledge and the men molding the silence of the women with their words. Truth does not need here the envelope of beauty as Jacques Lacan would have it, but rather a renouncing of beauty, as Tagore's Nikhil came to state it.

It is often considered the task of historiography to break the silences that announce the zones of taboo. There is even something heroic in the image of empowering women to speak and to give voice to the voiceless. I have myself found this a very complicated task, for when we use such imagery as breaking the silence, we may end by using our capacity to "unearth" hidden facts as a weapon. Even the idea that we should recover the narratives of violence becomes problematic when we realize that such narratives cannot be told unless we see the relation between pain and language that a culture has evolved. I have found it important to think of the division of labor between men and women in the work of mourning as a model for thinking about the relation between pain, language, and the body. Following Wittgenstein, this manner of conceptualizing the puzzle of pain frees us from thinking that statements about pain are in the nature of questions about certainty or doubt over our own pain or that of others. Instead, we begin to think of pain as acknowledgment and recognition; denial of the other's pain is not about the failings of the intellect but the failings of the spirit. In the register of the imaginary, the pain of the other not only asks for a home in language, but also seeks a home in the body.<sup>29</sup>

It is not that there is a seamless continuity between the distant shore and the everyday shore in which violence and grief are met, but one can understand the subtle transformations that go on only as we move from one



shore to the other, if we keep in mind the complex relation between speaking and hearing, between building a world that the living can inhabit with their loss and building a world in which the dead can find a home. It worries me that I have been unable to name that which died when autonomous citizens of India were simultaneously born as monsters. But then I have to remind myself and others that those who tried to name it such as Manto themselves touched madness and died in fierce regret for the loss of the radical dream of transforming India. Those who found speech easily as in the political debates on abducted women in the Constituent Assembly continue to talk about national honor when dealing with the violence that women have had to endure in every communal riot since the Partition.

#### FOUR

### *The Act of Witnessing*

#### *Violence, Gender, and Subjectivity*

MANY RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE THEORY of the subject have argued that the experience of becoming a subject is linked to the experience of subjugation in important ways.<sup>1</sup> The violations inscribed on the female body (both literally and figuratively) and the discursive formations around these violations, as we saw, made visible the imagination of the nation as a *masculine* nation. What did this do to the subjectivity of women? We need to ask not only how ethnic or communal violence was enacted through specific gendered acts of violation such as rape, but also how women may have taken these noxious signs of violation and reoccupied them through the work of domestication, ritualization, and renarration. I argued earlier that the discursive formations through which the nation-state was inaugurated attributed a particular type of subjectivity to women as victims of rape and abduction. Yet women's own formation of their subject positions, though mired in these constructions, was not completely determined by them. The previous chapter argued that women spoke of their experiences by anchoring their discourses to the genres of mourning and lamentation that already assigned a place to them in the cultural work of mourning, but they spoke of violence and pain *within* these genres as well as *outside* them. Through complex transactions between body and language they were able to both voice and *show* the hurt done to them as well as to provide witness to the harm done to the whole