

## Walking, Witnessing, Writing: An account of 1947 Partition in *The Sixth River*

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### Abstract

The present paper showcases a *response* to the trauma by Walking in Fiqr Taunsvi's *The Sixth River: A Journal from the Partition of India*. Each individual experience's' trauma differently and so are the ways of responding, the author suggests, Taunsvi's performs repetitive walks around the ruins of Lahore and witness' the downfall of his city as well as his psyche. The paper adopts idea of Walking as Writing expressed by Micheal de Certeau and Rebecca Solnit to elucidate that Taunsvi re-writes the city, rebuilds his identity through that act of walking since it reconnects body with mind as to place with identity. Roaming on the streets of Lahore during 1947, he not only witnesses' barbarity and wrote a memoir for himself and posterity, but also draws lines of connection and familiarity in an unfamiliar world of violence, migration, refugee camps, and loss of identity.

**Keywords:** 1947 Partition, Trauma, Violence, witnessing and walking

*"Death, terrible death-in the lanes of Lahore, on the streets, in the bazaars, at the corners, on the windows, in Hindus, in Muslims, in Sikhs-stalks everywhere."* (Taunsvi 54)

Appalled by the atrocities of communal violence, Taunsvi's description of omnipresent death was a quotidian affair even before the horrific exodus of August 1947 eclipsed Indian Independence. More than death, it was an impending fear of death that propelled anticipatory migration in March 1947, forcing the natives to leave their homes behind. Along with Lahore, Amritsar, Sialkot, Rawalpindi, Multan and Jullunder were on fire, communal gangs roamed the streets carrying khanjar and other weapons (Khan 117). Taunsvi wrote his memoir *The Sixth River* during such political furore and witnessed emanation of the sixth river, "river of blood and fire" in Lahore, Punjab, the five rivers being Sutlej, Ravi, Chenab, Jhelum and Beas from which the nomenclature of Punjab is derived, *panj* (five) and *aab* (river).

This paper navigates Taunsvi's way of responding to the trauma of Partition through walking on the streets of Lahore. In consideration to the burgeoning framework of Trauma Studies that includes "multiple traumas", a combination of sexual, psychological, social and cultural traumas (Clift and Maratos 22), transgenerational trauma, experienced differently by second or third generation and cross-cultural trauma, uniquely expressed by cultures across the globe (Baladev 8), the scholar intends to follow the above assumption of multifarious idea of trauma and suggests that representations and responses of trauma are as multiple and diverse. Thus, by the body movement, Walking, Taunsvi adopts a distinctive response to the trauma of

1947 Partition to reconstructs his fragmented identity and rebuilds the connection between the self and space.

In the words of Ayesha Jalal, 1947 Partition was “the central historical event in 20<sup>th</sup> century South Asia”, a moment which has “neither beginning nor end” and will continue to determine the continents’ past, present and future (Jalal 4). However, unlike the western Holocaust which preserved the event through archival projects, monumentalising and museulising, survivors of 1947 Partition chose *silence*. During 1980s, influenced by the “memory boom”, scholars like Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin compiled survivors’ interviews, adopted western principles of Trauma Theory and proposed that the silence was either because of unspeakable aspect of traumatic event, the failure of language to represent horrors of Partition or simply to repress the traumatic memories as Ricouer puts it “not to recall the evil” which works bilaterally, a deliberate forgetting and selective remembering (453). As the academia began decolonizing the Trauma Theory from Euro-American approach that specifically focuses on a single event-based trauma, scholars recognised to restructure Trauma Theory on pluralistic model that consider the significance of socio-cultural environment where structural violence occurs based on race, gender or caste prejudices, hence instead of event based trauma they shifted their attention to accumulation of various incidents that builds a slow trauma (Balaev 4, Craps 9). Partition scholars too turned their way to the heterogenous model of trauma delineating multiple ways of representation and coping mechanisms. By this, I suggest contemporary South Asian trauma theory re-negotiates its framework by vernacularisation of trauma which adopts “culturally sanctioned” representations of traumatic pasts (Kabir 65). Partition, in Taunsvi’s *Sixth River* reflects on his culminating madness while repetitive walks became a coping mechanism. Walking, witnessing and writing simultaneously complimented each other in this process to capture the violence, re-living it while writing, but also making sense from the non-sensical violence.

Trauma, as Caruth claims, is a response that “occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.” (11) This is inherent paradox of the trauma that when violent event occurs for the first time, it was incomprehensible, a shock that fails to integrate in the psyche and thus, in its belatedness, it re-occurs until the victim comprehend what had happened. (94). Borrowing from Freud, La Capra suggested two interrelated stages to cope up with trauma, acting out and working through, they can be simultaneous or sequential. The former one is denial of the violent event, and thus victim relives it in every moment, trying to grasp meaning out of it while the latter is capable of reaction or demonstration (Schick 1838). Manto’s *Khol Do* is poignant description of simultaneous occurrence of both the stages in repetitive action of the protagonist who was raped by soldiers during Partition riots, later she became a traumatised victim of sexual and psychological violence and when the doctor asked nurse to open the window, addressing “khol do”, the protagonist opened her bottom, *salwar*. Similarly, Taunsvi fails to understand graveness of unexpected communal hatred as he roams the lanes of Lahore, witnessing “barbarity and bestiality” of communal violence, migration of the natives as “people burdened with their bedding” (52), and piled up bodies of worshippers on a lorry thrown by the soldiers like sacks of fresh jaggery (58). His trauma becomes unbearable when he felt “hammers were being struck on [his] head”, but he closed his eyes, put fingers on his ears and kept moving and passing with his bowed head without thinking his path (52).

What walking on the streets provided him? Among the ruins of Lahore, why he chose to walk and witness the hatred? Can a simple act of walking cure his forthcoming madness, preventing him to become another Toba Tek Singh? To answer these questions, Firstly, I will unpack the close relationship between an individual and the city by exploring place identity, and how violent events like communal riots change our spatial understanding of the city as well our identity. Secondly, I will theorise Walking as an act of rebuilding the city and self, a coping mechanism to deal trauma.

Identity can be categorised on various scales such as political identity, social identity, religious identity, ethnic identity or national identity, of our interest in this paper is the city identity or place identity. Individual built their identities around the spatio-temporal framework, their sense of place is what constructs their identity. Tuan suggests the term “topophilia” to describes close relationship between individual identity and the place they inhabit while Jackson further enunciates that relationship with the place is formed with time, a distinctive sense of place that is constitutes of recurring events which reflects a habit formation process. However, the sense of place can be realized only when one suffers the pain of leaving the city or changing the landscape of the city. Hence, any kind of change in the physical atmosphere of the place will directly affect individual’s identity and sense of place associated with it (Tuan 4). In other words, the change in the landscape of the city, either by surrounding violence or architecture will eventually change the demographics of the city as well as individual’s identity. In Taunsvi’s case, both occurs simultaneously, displacement and demographic changes.

Taunsvi’s Lahore is too changed, he chose not to be at his home and wander from Islami Hotel at Bhati Gate to Anarkali to coffee houses to cinema to his friend’s houses, on his way he saw streets full of bullets, bombs, pistols and clarion calls of Allah-Akbar, Sat Sri Akal, burning of houses, temples and mosques, the unfamiliarity of Lahore made him dumbstruck, the streets were either deserted or “cries, groans and moans” became voice of the city. Evidently, his trauma has disrupted his understanding of self and the place he inhabits, his beloved city Lahore. He asks, “How to fall in love with Lahore?”

Can Taunsvi’s regain his old Lahore? Will he again fall in love with this city?

Trauma is widely considered as psychological disturbance, however, to deny its association to the physical body will be an underestimation to its overall impact on the individual. In fact, traumatic experiences often result into blurring the boundaries between body and mind, thus the victim lose his sanity to respond (Bond and Craps 5). Violent events not only disrupts the psyche, but the body is also affected by it, since “brain , body and mind” are inextricably linked with each other and any kind of disturbance in a single entity will affect the other two explicitly or implicitly (Van der Kolk 216) Further, Livene observed it is the body that first gives response to the trauma by repetition or not acting out, a certain numbness felt by the victim and hence, the brain-body duo fails to connect and stops working coherently. Somatic responses by the victim are performed in order to cope up with the event (xii). To put it succinctly, a traumatic victim is unable to react on the violent event because his psyche is impotent to integrate an event which he has never experienced before. Body and Psyche are unable to connect, the dysfunctional victim struggles to find a logic in irrationality. In some cases, when body starts reacting, it means the body endeavours to re-connect to the brain, trying to make sense of what had happened.

Walking is a simple activity, moving your legs in a rhythm is not an activity that can be theorised or philosophised. Yet, poets and authors have written extensively about Walking, Thoreau writes, “When we walk, we naturally go to the fields and woods: what would become of us, if we walked only in a garden or a mall?” For him, walking is affirming his primitive identity in association to the nature, a raw and organic American, while both Wordsworth and Rousseau identified walking as an act of “social liberation” (Solnit 200). Gandhi appended a political dimension to the Walking by marching collectively with the natives for the nation to depict non-violence in various anti-colonial movements.

In his incisively unique work, *Philosophy of Walking*, Gros claims that walking “empties” the mind or in other level, it “fills” the mind with different sense of purpose (78). When one walks, the footsteps re-experience the space, re-builds it and consequently it adds our new experiences to the previous one. Thus, walking becomes an activity that helps to build our identity with the places, the body selects places to visit, it is a conscious or unconscious habit of the individual to go certain places, as Taunsvi says it was his “habit” to go these places of the city, a part of his “mental make-up.” (46) Walking on the streets amid the turmoil was humiliating but only way to combat, as he walks, he re-experience the trauma in each of his walks, these repeatative walks builds his way to comprehend and cope up with the trauma.

Taunsvi’s trauma is not a mere response to 1947 Partition, a static event, but a response to collective events that marked his inarticulateness and inability to respond. Erikson notes that trauma slowly augments in the psyche, it is not a static event that results into trauma but a constellation of various incidents which culminates into trauma (471). Taunsvi witnessed fall of his beloved city, neighbours turning enemies of each other, betrayal of friendships as they leave the city and asked him to buy furniture for money, but he does not know “art of fleeing” and wryly ask “Will you buy Lahore” (52). Hence, he called the event as beginning of the “dark ages,” a civilizational crisis when humans were reduced to indistinct “dots” (125). Moreover, Taunsvi’s identity to the place is also connected with the natives. Lund suggests that other inhabitants of the place also affects identity-place dynamics, an individual’s identity to locate himself with a specific place is marked by the natives too, migration or social disturbances that affects others are also held responsible for the changing dynamics of the individual (7).

Walking is equated with Writing by numerous scholars because both the activities transcend the boundaries of time and space and rewrites new stories that connects past and future (Solnit 97). Solnit claims “When you give yourself to places, they give you yourself back” (26), in Taunsvi’s case, similar happens, he roams the city in order to find himself again, to re-locate the old Lahore or to re-build Lahore in its ruins. The body that experience trauma navigates its way via walking in the city, and gradually, step by step, one re-writes the city, re-builds it, in other words, walking becomes “an act of enunciation” (de Certeu 119), the walker transforms the space by marking his steps on the chosen places. Walking is equated to being nowhere, it is lack of fixed place, “It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper” (103). Doreen Massey conceptualised three prepositions of space, first, space as a product of interrelations, second, as a possible sphere of multiplicity and heterogeneity and third, a sphere in process, under construction, never fixed. The space which Taunsvi builds through his act of walking reflect on a new space that he creates to understand the violent events and in this process of comprehending the events, he simultaneously goes on a journey to heal, to cope up with his trauma.

To conclude what I have elucidated in the paper, Taunsvi act of walking helped him to witness the ruins of Lahore, writing a newly formed city of destruction in his memoir, in other level his walking re-writes the city. Walking enables him to connect the body to mind as identity to the place. If Trauma disrupts the mind, then walking is the only activity in which “mind, body and the world is aligned” (Solnit 5). The body moves, observing the sights of ruins and destruction, captures the city and “make things happen in the mind” (Solnit 18). During this process, the mind endeavours to re-gain the balance, it transforms the world view of victim by seeing his city a new in a demolished state. Thus, walking is an active engagement of “knowing the world through body and the body through the world” (Solnit 43). Trauma of Partition can only be endured by the subversive acts of witnessing, in *Sixth River*, Walking is Writing the city again, building the self again.

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